



International Justice and Peace  
3211 4<sup>th</sup> Street, NE  
Washington, DC 20017

Tel. (202) 541-3160 Fax (202) 541-3339



228 West Lexington Street  
Baltimore, MD 21201

Tel. (410) 625-2220 Fax (410)  
685-1635

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March 12, 2008

Committee on Foreign Relations  
U.S. Senate

Dear Senator,

We are writing on behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to express our strong support for continuing and strengthening the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). We urge you to preserve its foundational goals of saving lives, caring for the infected and the affected, and preventing the spread of this deadly disease.

USCCB and CRS have been deeply committed to the success of the PEPFAR initiative since its overwhelming bipartisan approval by Congress in 2003. We have been actively engaged in education and advocacy in the United States to support continued major investments in the effort to fight the global pandemic.

Around the world, the Church has long been involved in offering life-saving help to people threatened by HIV and AIDS, regardless of race, creed or social status. The activities of Catholic health institutions extend from major urban centers to the most remote rural villages. They deliver approximately 25% of all HIV and AIDS care worldwide. Since 2003, PEPFAR grants to CRS have enabled it to intensify efforts to provide prevention, care and treatment in 12 of the 15 PEPFAR focus countries and many others, principally in Africa.

Based on the valuable experience of those most deeply involved in responding to this deadly disease, original legislation authorizing PEPFAR was carefully negotiated, and reflects a consensus on what works in combating HIV and AIDS and how best to respond. Reauthorizing legislation must build on that consensus and maintain the PEPFAR's strong focus on programs of proven effectiveness in prevention, care and treatment.

We welcome the proposal in the draft bill of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations for a significant increase in funding. We also support strengthening PEPFAR's programs to address two other seriously debilitating, often deadly, diseases that affect primarily poor people in developing countries: tuberculosis and malaria.

We appreciate other important provisions that strengthen the healthcare workforce in program countries and strengthen food and nutrition programs—both vital components of treatment and care for HIV/AIDS patients and for the support of orphans and vulnerable children.

We are concerned, however, about certain changes made to the existing legislation by the Senate bill that could be interpreted as introducing extraneous new agendas into PEPFAR, i.e., family planning and reproductive health, and downgrading the role of effective prevention

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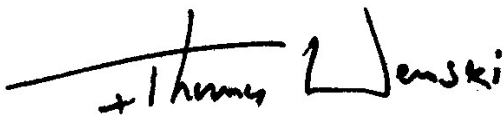
programs. It is critical that programs for HIV and AIDS prevention, care and treatment remain sharply focused on their core objective of saving human lives. It is also vital to successful prevention of sexual transmission of HIV to prioritize values-based programs that focus on abstinence, mutual fidelity and partner reduction. These programs have proven highly effective in countries with generalized epidemics.

We believe that the PEPFAR program must be authorized this fiscal year. Programming of HIV and AIDS activities by local institutions in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere requires advance planning, e.g., to assure timely delivery of drugs that local institutions must purchase abroad. Most of these institutions have limited independent resources and are reluctant to make programming decisions until they have a firm funding commitment. The risk of a hiatus in assured funding, however brief, could disrupt treatment regimens, undermine the credibility of healthcare institutions providing HIV services, and endanger lives.

Just as important as getting this done soon is getting it done right. The Church's commitment is not about ideology; it is about saving lives. We hope and trust that Congress will not inject other ideologies into a program that has saved millions of lives in the 15 focus countries and beyond, and could save millions more in the years ahead.

With appreciation for your continued support for addressing the critical health needs of the poor around the world, we remain,

Sincerely yours,

Handwritten signature of Thomas G. Wenski in black ink.

Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski  
Bishop of Orlando  
Chairman, Committee on International  
Justice and Peace

Handwritten signature of Ken Hackett in black ink.

Ken Hackett  
President  
Catholic Relief Services