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UNAIDS GIPA Principles Critical to AIDS Action. People Living With HIV and AIDS Must have the Same Rights as every Citizen.

North America – This year, the theme of World AIDS Day is accountability. The 2006 slogan “Stop AIDS: Keep the Promise” is about holding policy makers and elected officials accountable to their promise to combat and stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. This includes meeting Global Targets as well as providing support for programs with the United States and Canada. The Global Network of People living with HIV/AIDS - North America Chapter (GNP+NA), a diverse network of individuals living with HIV, calls upon our elected officials in Canada and the U.S. to hold true to their obligation and promise to stem the rising tide of HIV infection. To accomplish this, persons living with HIV/AIDS must be involved and to be involved they need to be able to live free of discrimination and prejudice. In this aim, elected leaders still have a long way to go to keep their promise.

In 2001, 189 United Nations members signed on to the GIPA principle, or the Greater Involvement of People Living with HIV/AIDS. This principle recognizes that the greater involvement of people living with HIV/AIDS is an important prerequisite for countries to be able to effectively respond to the epidemic. GNP+NA reaffirms that in order to meet the stated and promised goal of stopping AIDS, people living with HIV must be given the respect and privacy deserved and the protection of basic human rights.

An important and integral part of any comprehensive program to reduce HIV/AIDS must include respect for the health, well being, safety, and, just as importantly, the privacy of persons living with this disease. Without strong efforts to reduce the stigma associated with HIV disease, people will continue to live in fear of disclosure, avoid getting tested and will even fail to access appropriate treatment. People living with HIV/AIDS must realize their right to self-determination and to live without fear or discrimination.

In the United States, the principle of GIPA has been sorely missing on the national policy front. For over a year the U.S. Congress has been debating reauthorization of the Ryan White CARE Act, which outside of Medicaid is the single most important source of

funding for HIV-related services, including access to medications. During the entire national debate about reauthorization of Ryan White, the role and voice of persons living with HIV/AIDS has been sorely lacking. The Congress itself, in its deliberations over Ryan White, has failed in its obligation to listen to the public or persons living with the disease. There are over 1 million U.S. residents who are infected with HIV; changes that the U.S. Congress and the President make to this and other programs that serve persons with HIV/AIDS will impact on a significant number of Americans. We call upon the U.S. government to solicit a greater role for persons living with HIV in the formulation of national policies around HIV/AIDS prevention, care and treatment.

Matthew Lesieur, Chair of the Policy Committee and American Board Member states: “Far too often, policy makers and legislators make fundamental life and death decisions around the delivery of HIV/AIDS services, without even knowing what the very basic needs of persons living with HIV are. In the United States, the Bush Administration has completely ignored the domestic needs and concerns of people living with HIV/AIDS. We must all do better at ensuring greater participation of infected and affected communities in the national dialogue around HIV/AIDS policies.”

Recent statistics reveal that over 58,000 Canadians are living with HIV/AIDS. Since 2002, the number of Canadians infected with HIV has increased by 16%. Funding has not risen to meet growing needs, and little has been done to address the sharp rise in infections within Aboriginal communities and communities of immigrant Canadians. Health care services for women in Western Canada do not have a single Aboriginal staff person, despite a high proportion of Aboriginal clients. All levels of government and community partners must work together and evidence clearly shows that an effective response to HIV/AIDS must include people living with HIV/AIDS as an integral part of program development and the decision-making.

Ted Gaudet, Canadian Board Member states that “Any response to the AIDS epidemic must include strong prevention messages and people living with HIV/AIDS must play a key role in delivering that message. Never has the role and responsibility of every HIV positive individual been so crucial to stem the tide of increasing infection rates. To be successful and to garner the expertise and commitment of a growing number of HIV positive individuals, it will require new and better implemented policies by employers, policy makers, institutions and funding agencies in supportive environments. ”

GNP+NA is also launching a new project to look into the rising tendency of American and Canadian policy makers to criminalize the transmission of HIV infection. Laws, courts rulings and legislation that isolates the transmission of HIV as a criminal action only further promotes prejudice, fear and basic misunderstanding about HIV. If policy makers held to their promise to reduce stigma around HIV and included persons living with HIV in the conversation, we could all work together to reduce infections.

Stated Errol Chin-loy, US Co-Chair of GNP+NA “Policy makers need to recognize and better value the input that persons living with HIV can have in the formulation of solid, well rounded public policies that impact on the every day lives of those, like myself, who

live with this disease each and every day. The rising trend towards criminalization of HIV is a perfect example of where elected officials are completely out of touch and unaware of the multiple implications of their public policies. They need to reach out to us.”

In Canada states Raymond Berger, Canadian Co-Chair of GNP+NA, “The HIV/AIDS community is quite worried. AIDS does not seem to be an important issue for our most high level leader, Prime Minister Stephen Harper. New moneys from the Federal Initiative will be much too slow to come down to the community and, moreover, his conservative government is now cutting in most harm reduction programs. This altogether will only increase the stigma and discrimination faced by some of the most marginalized and vulnerable of Canadian citizens, jeopardize their health and quality of life and will not, in any way, be helpful to stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS, on the contrary. The solution to AIDS will not be found in stigmatization, repression or criminalization; it is with accurate information and prevention strategies that we will prevail”.

“As persons living with HIV/AIDS we have a specific responsibility to be at decision-making tables and make sure that our issues are brought to the public eye so that appropriate actions are taken accordingly. GIPA means the greater involvement of people living with HIV/AIDS, including those most marginalized or coming from the most marginalized and vulnerable communities. As persons living with HIV/AIDS, individually and as a community, we have a pivotal and strategic role in constantly reminding to our leaders, policy-makers and other stakeholders, to keep their promises and listen to all segments, groups and communities of persons living with HIV/AIDS”.

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