Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

January 27, 2006

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Madam Secretary:

We are writing to voice our objections to an organized campaign against federal grantees working to prevent the sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS in the developing world. Spearheaded by the conservative group Focus on the Family and joined by dozens of Republican lawmakers, the effort has been based on a narrow ideological view of prevention methods and has relied on numerous errors and distortions of fact. If allowed to succeed in its goal of defunding effective, evidence-based prevention programs, this attack will undermine our ability to fight the HIV epidemic.

A set of evidence-based approaches to preventing the sexual transmission of HIV was endorsed by more than 100 scientific, religious, and public leaders in a statement published in 2004 in the medical journal *The Lancet.*[1] These interventions include condom education and distribution, outreach to commercial sex workers, accurate education on risk behaviors, and partnerships with local organizations, as well as promotion of abstinence. Subsequent to its publication, Ambassador Randall Tobias, the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator, wrote on behalf of the Administration that this statement "represents a tremendous effort to end some of the divisiveness that imperils the effectiveness of our common fight, and is consistent with our previously published policy."[2]

Recently, however, some of the most effective groups implementing these evidence-based strategies have come under attack. In a series of congressional briefings, public hearings, and letters to the Administration, Focus on the Family and conservative politicians have made multiple false or misleading allegations about these groups and their life-saving HIV work. And there is evidence that these attacks may be having an impact.

We urge you to reject these groundless attempts to undermine HIV prevention and to affirm that the Administration will continue to fund groups performing evidence-based HIV prevention work.

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[1] Halperin, Daniel, et al., *The Time Has Come for Common Ground on Preventing Sexual Transmission of HIV*, The Lancet, Vol. 364, Issue. 9449 (Nov. 27, 2004).

[2] Letter from Ambassador Randall L. Tobias, U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator to Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform (Feb. 9, 2005).

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The Organized Campaign Against Evidence-Based HIV Prevention

Since January 2005, the conservative Focus on the Family and some Republican members of Congress have sharply criticized organizations implementing evidence-based HIV prevention activities. These allegations have been repeated in congressional briefings, public hearings, and letters to President Bush and USAID Administrator Natsios. The stated objective has been to interrupt the funding to programs that conservatives object to on ideological grounds.

On January 12, 2005, Focus on the Family gave an invitation-only presentation to congressional staff.[3] The organization summarized its objections to USAID in one slide:

Summary of USAID problems

- Incestuous relationship with grantees
- Rube Goldberg organizational model
- Liberal cancer
- No adult supervision over country missions
- Cannot reflect Bush administration philosophy
- Corrupt grant-making process[4]

For the remainder of the presentation, Focus on the Family criticized USAID, specific grantees, and specific government employees for promoting condoms, discriminating against faith-based organizations, and opposing abstinence education. The presentation included eleven slides critical of grantees of USAID's community- and faith-based initiative for supporting access to condoms.[5] Fifteen slides criticized organizations that provide condoms, referring to such groups as the "condom cartel."[6] Another three slides of the presentation were devoted to asserting that a specific USAID employee is homosexual.[7] The Focus on the Family presentation concluded with the recommendation that Congress hold hearings and that funding for grantees that distribute condoms be "terminated."[8]

The claims made by Focus on the Family were subsequently echoed by a set of conservative politicians.

On April 13, at a House International Relations Committee oversight hearing on HIV/AIDS activities, some committee members highlighted many of the criticisms put forward

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[3] Focus on the Family, presentation to Congressional Staff (Jan. 12, 2005).

[4] *Id.* at 26. The Focus on the Family presentation is 55 pages long and is numbered 1–28 followed by 1–27.

[5] *Id.* at 2: 20.

[6] *Id.* at 2: 27.

[7] *Id.* at 1: 28.

[8] *Id.* at 2: 27.

by Focus on the Family.[9] For example, repeating a charge originally put forward by Focus on the Family, one witness accused Population Services International, a USAID grantee, of discriminating against his faith-based organization.[10] Population Services International was not invited to defend its record at the hearing.

On May 19, Senator Tom Coburn sent a letter to President Bush criticizing multiple USAID grantees that conduct evidence-based prevention activities.[11] Like Focus on the Family, Senator Coburn criticized Population Services International for its work providing outreach and condoms to commercial sex workers, and recommended that its funding be reviewed. He also mischaracterized the effectiveness of condoms.

On May 31, Senator Rick Santorum sent a letter to President Bush criticizing several USAID grantees, including the World Council of Churches and the International Center for Research on Women, for having "a solid record of anti-abstinence, pro-prostitution, and anti-American activities."[12] Like Senator Coburn and Focus on the Family, Senator Santorum criticized grantees for their work with commercial sex workers, which he claimed is "contrary to the moral values of every major world religion and to the vast majority of Americans."[13]

On June 7, Representative Christopher Smith sent a letter to President Bush, in which he repeated many of the charges originally put forward by Focus on the Family.[14]

On July 15, Representative Mark Souder and 28 other House members sent a letter to USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios criticizing several grantees.[15] In a letter largely identical to Senator Santorum's letter to President Bush, they repeated many of the same allegations. They also alleged that another grantee, CARE International, has "illegal" and "pro-prostitution" policies.[16] Focus on the Family had earlier criticized CARE for its support of condom distribution.[17]

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[9] Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, *Hearing on U.S. Response to Global AIDS Crisis: A Two Year Review* (Apr. 13, 2005).

[10] Focus on the Family, Citizen Magazine, *Burying Their Hope* (Apr. 2005) (online at: http://www.family.org/cforum/citizenmag/coverstory/a0036010.cfm).

[11] Letter from Senator Tom Coburn to President George W. Bush (May 19, 2005).

[12] Letter from Senator Rick Santorum to the President (May 31, 2005).

[13] *Id.*

[14] Letter from Representative Christopher H. Smith to President George W. Bush (June 7, 2005).

[15] Letter from Representative Mark E. Souder et al. to Andrew Natsios, Administrator, Agency for International Development (July 15, 2005).

[16] *Id.*

[17] Focus on the Family, presentation to Congressional Staff (Jan. 12, 2005).

The Impact of the Campaign Against Evidence-Based HIV Prevention

The overlapping and ideologically aligned attacks by Focus on the Family and conservative lawmakers have targeted essential elements of effective prevention of sexual transmission of HIV: outreach to commercial sex workers, a comprehensive approach to HIV prevention, and partnerships with faith-based organizations. Unfortunately, there is evidence that these attacks are influencing U.S. policy.

1. Threatening Effective Health Outreach to Sex Workers

Populations of commercial sex workers tend to bear a disproportionately high burden of HIV infection.[18] Sex workers also serve as a source of infection to the population at large.[19] For these reasons, the public health community has identified commercial sex workers as critical recipients of HIV services. The consensus statement from *The Lancet* describes "the identification and direct involvement of most-at-risk and marginalized populations," including commercial sex workers, as "critical."[20]

Despite this public health consensus, Senator Coburn denounced a Population Services International program providing outreach and education to sex workers in Central America. In his May 19 letter to President Bush, Senator Coburn claimed that PSI's programs "exploit victims of the sex trade."[21] He also portrayed this program as grounds to withhold future funding from PSI, writing that his concerns "should also be part of the past performance evaluation of all PSI grant and contract proposals."[22]

Senator Coburn's letter appears to have had an impact. After Senator Coburn's letter was sent, political appointees at USAID abruptly withdrew a request for proposals to continue the Central America outreach program. A month later, these appointees replaced it with a revised request for proposals that increased the emphasis placed on abstinence education.[23] According to a USAID employee who attended a meeting weighing the cancellation of the grant, one political appointee repeatedly held up a copy of Senator Coburn's letter, stating that Senator Coburn did

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[18] Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator, Department of State, *Engendering Bold Leadership: The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, First Annual Report to Congress*, p. 22 (2005).

[19] *Id.*

[20] Halperin, Daniel, et al., *The Time Has Come for Common Ground on Preventing Sexual Transmission of HIV*, The Lancet, Vol. 364, Issue. 9449 (Nov. 27, 2004).

[21] Letter from Senator Tom Coburn to President George W. Bush (May 19, 2005).

[22] Letter from Senator Tom Coburn to President George W. Bush (May 19, 2005).

[23] *Health Groups, Religious Right Clash over Anti-HIV Efforts for Prostitutes,* Baltimore Sun (Aug. 28, 2005).

not want PSI to receive funding and that the grant would have to be altered to respond to his concerns.[24]

It was recently announced that PSI did receive funding under the revised grant to perform prevention work in Central America.[25]

2. Interfering with Established Outreach to Faith- and Community-Based Organizations

Faith-based organizations often represent the primary or only line of access to large portions of the population in target countries. As part of the rapid increase in prevention and treatment spending, the Administration has partnered with many community- and faith-based organizations, both directly and through intermediary grantees.

In 2003, USAID established the CORE Initiative, an effort to provide outreach to community- and faith-based organizations and "advance multi-sectoral responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic through grants, capacity building, and networking."[26] Since its inception, the CORE Initiative has partnered with nearly 200 faith- and community-based organizations preventing transmission of HIV and providing care for those living with AIDS.[27] Its efforts have garnered strong praise from such faith-based organizations as Samaritan's Purse and the American Jewish World Service.[28]

In spite of the CORE Initiative's success at providing partnership and capacity building assistance with faith- and community-based organizations, Focus on the Family, Senator Santorum, and members of the House of Representatives have criticized the initiative. Focus on the Family criticized CORE coalition members for statements supporting condoms, and

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[24] Interview with current USAID employee by Minority Staff of the House Committee on Government Reform (Dec. 2, 2005).

[25] Email from U.S. Agency for International Development to Population Services International (Jan 3. 2006).

[26] The CORE Initiative is structured though a coalition of primary grantees responsible for reaching out to and selecting grantees on the community level. Led by Care International, the coalition members are the World Council of Churches, the International Center for Research on Women, the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. CORE Initiative, *Strengthening Community Solutions to HIV/AIDS* (online at: http://www.coreinitiative.org/).

[27] CORE Initiative, *Grants Update* (Sep. 2005) (online at: http://www.coreinitiative.org/).

[28] Letter from Gary Lundstrom, International Director of Projects, Samaritan's Purse to Ambassador Randall L. Tobias, U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator (June 23, 2005); Letter from Ruth Messinger, President, American Jewish World Service to Ambassador Randall L. Tobias, U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator (June 16, 2005).

recommended that the initiative be "terminate[d]."[29] Senator Santorum described CORE partners as having "a solid record of anti-abstinence, pro-prostitution, and anti-American activities."[30] Similarly, Representative Souder and 28 other members of the House wrote of the same CORE partners that their activities would be "offensive to a vast majority of religious adherents the world over."[31]

Subsequent to this barrage of allegations, the CORE Initiative partners were informed by USAID that the initiative will not be renewed.[32]

3. Mischaracterizing Critical Interventions

In other instances, the attacks appear aimed at undermining effective organizations providing HIV interventions. Multiple organizations working to reduce HIV have been subject to spurious accusations:

- The International HIV/AIDS Alliance supports community programs that include HIV prevention, AIDS treatment, and care for those infected and affected, and it assists the U.S. government in partnering with local organizations and communities.[33] Unfortunately, one of the Alliance's stated goals — to reach "people from marginalized groups who are most vulnerable and the hardest to reach" — has made it the focus of conservative criticism.[34] Both Senator Santorum and members of the House asserted that the International HIV/AIDS Alliance is "pro-prostitution," and "at the vanguard of prostitution legalization efforts."[35] In fact, this organization does not and has never supported the legalization of prostitution.[36]

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[29] Focus on the Family, presentation to Congressional Staff (Jan. 12, 2005).

[30] Letter from Senator Rick Santorum to the President (May 31, 2005).

[31] Letter from Representative Mark E. Souder et al. to Andrew Natsios, Administrator, Agency for International Development (July 15, 2005).

[32] Letter from Kent R. Hill, Acting Assistant Administrator for Global Health, U.S. Agency for International Development to Dr. Alvaro Bermejo, MD, MPH, Executive Director, International HIV/AIDS Alliance (Sep. 28, 2005).

[33] CORE Initiative, *CORE Initiative Partners* (Sept. 2005) (online at: http://www.coreinitiative.org/About/partners.php).

[34] International HIV/AIDS Alliance, *How We Work* (online at: http://www.aidsalliance.org/sw7157.asp?).

[35] Letter from Senator Rick Santorum to the President (May 31, 2005); Letter from Representative Mark E. Souder et al. to Andrew Natsios, Administrator, Agency for International Development (July 15, 2005).

[36] The letter from Representative Souder and other members of Congress points to two supposed International HIV/AIDS Alliance employees as "associates of the Network for Sex Work Projects, an outspoken pro-prostitution advocacy group." In fact, the Network of Sex

- Family Health International (FHI) sponsors a successful AIDS intervention program in Thailand, providing condoms and critical HIV education to the extremely high-risk population of male and female sex workers. Yet Representative Smith wrote that "a January 4, 2005 article in the *Bangkok Post* criticized the organization's pro-prostitution agenda in Thailand."[37] In fact, FHI does not support the legalization of prostitution, nor does the *Bangkok Post* article criticize the program.[38]

- The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) analyzes policy areas affecting women and works with the U.S. government to assist grantees in effective monitoring and evaluation of their programs.[39] Senator Santorum wrote to President Bush that ICRW "openly supports the legalization of prostitution."[40] Representative Souder and his co-signers told Administrator Natsios that this organization holds "radical" "pro-prostitution" views.[41] In fact, the International Center for Research on Women does not support the legalization of prostitution.[42]

These attacks and others like them can generate a chilling effect among groups providing HIV interventions. Some groups that perform critical work with high-risk populations, such as sex workers, may choose not to partner with the U.S. for fear that they be unjustly attacked.

Work Projects (NSWP) does not take a position on the legalization of prostitution. It is a coalition of sex-worker organizations that promotes health and human rights for sex workers. While member organizations may advocate for the legalization of sex-work, that is not part of the NSWP mission. In addition, one of the individuals cited was never an employee of the International HIV/AIDS Alliance and has been deceased since October 2004. Telephone conversation between International HIV/AIDS Alliance and Committee on Government Reform Minority Staff (Aug. 11, 2005).

[37] Letter from Representative Christopher H. Smith to President George W. Bush (June 7, 2005).

[38] Letter from Albert J. Siemens, PhD, Chief Executive Officer and Vice Chairman, Family Health International, to President George W. Bush (June 16, 2005). The *Bangkok Post* article specifically notes that the program "is the first to focus its efforts specifically on helping" male sex workers. The article also describes the "delicate balancing act" the work requires, and highlights the need for the program by noting that a "remarkable" number of sex workers at one outreach event lacked basic information about HIV transmission and prevention. Bangkok Post, *Boys Keep Swinging* (Jan. 4, 2005).

[39] CORE Initiative, *CORE Initiative Partners* (Sep. 2005) (online at: http://www.coreinitiative.org/About/partners.php).

[40] Letter from Senator Rick Santorum to the President (May 31, 2005).

[41] Letter from Representative Mark E. Souder et al. to Andrew Natsios, Administrator, Agency for International Development (July 15, 2005).

[42] Letter from Geeta Rao Gupta, President, International Center for Research on Women to President George W. Bush (June 13, 2005).

Others may feel that they have to deemphasize important aspects of their work, such as condom distribution, if they want to compete for U.S. funds.

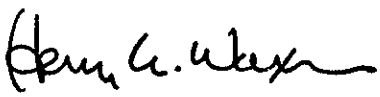
Conclusion

More than 95% of HIV-positive people — over 40 million individuals — live in developing countries.[43] AIDS killed more than three million people worldwide in the last year alone.[44] In order to help turn back the tide of this global epidemic, the United States must make effective use of proven interventions and rely on the best available science.

The series of coordinated attacks against some of the best established and most effective groups performing critical intervention activities threatens to undermine the U.S. response. These attacks reject the expert consensus on effective, scientific AIDS prevention in favor of a conservative ideological agenda promoting falsehoods and distortions.

We urge you to repudiate deceptive and divisive attempts to defund essential efforts against this disease. We ask you to strongly endorse a merit-based grantmaking process and the use of the best available science to guide U.S. efforts to prevent and respond to AIDS.

Sincerely,



Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member
House Committee on Government Reform

Dick Durbin
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Tom Lantos
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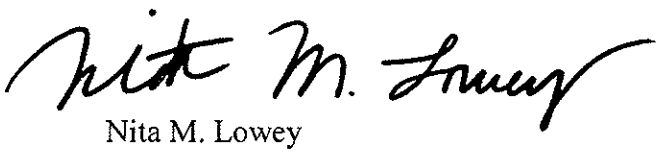
House Committee on International Relations



Nita M. Lowey
Ranking Minority Member
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[43] The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, *HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria: The Status and Impact of the Three Diseases* (Dec. 2004) (online at: http://www.theglobalfund.org/en/files/about/replenishment/ disease_report_en.pdf).

[44] UNAIDS, *AIDS Epidemic Update* (Dec. 2004) (online at: http://www.unaids.org/wad2004/report.html).

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