



# Congressional Black Caucus

of the Congress of the United States  
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## **Statement by Congresswoman Donna Christensen in response to the new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) HIV Incidence Numbers**

WASHINGTON, DC — On Sunday, August 3, 2008, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a new report detailing the nation's HIV incidence numbers. Noting that in 2006, there were an estimated 56,300 – and not 40,000, as previously thought – new HIV infections, this report confirms that this epidemic is hitting the United States even harder than previously known.

“I applaud the CDC for taking this bold step in providing this information. Though the 40% increase over the previous estimates of HIV incidence is startling, it shows – and prepares us to better address the fact – that we are not winning the war against HIV/AIDS,” noted Congresswoman Donna Christensen. “Coming on the heels of the Black AIDS Institute's report and work on the HIV Elimination Act by the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS and the Clergy Conclave, the new CDC report revealing higher numbers of persons with HIV infection should give impetus to their call to greater action on the part of the federal government, private foundations, the global AIDS agencies and the Black community,” continued the Congresswoman.

“I hope that this report serves as the wakeup call we need – as a nation – to address this serious public health challenge with a smart and comprehensive public health approach that is incorporated into the larger universal coverage and health disparity elimination efforts which must include increased funding and an emphasis on addressing the social determinants of health.”

“In truth, this report did not convey anything we did not know about HIV infection modes. We have known about the high-risk groups and have tried to get this Administration to target HIV/AIDS efforts to them. What it does convey, however, is how grossly we – as a nation – underestimated this epidemic's impact on our nation's most vulnerable and often most marginalized communities,” noted Congresswoman Christensen. “And this report confirms that we are in dire need of a national strategy that not only emphasizes prevention in the general community and ensures that the funding follows the trends of the epidemic, but also that calls for an end to ideology-driven policies like abstinence-only programs and bans on needle exchange.”

It has long been known that under this Administration, funding for HIV/AIDS programs and initiatives have been guided more by ideology than by evidence-based public health recommendations. This report sheds light on the disastrous impact of what happens when ideology – and not evidence – directs public health efforts. “We know that prevention



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works and that there are evidence-based strategies to achieve successful behavior changes that lead to reduced HIV transmission,” observed Congresswoman Christensen.

“However, this Administration has ignored these known truths. Instead, they have decreased CDC’s prevention budget by 19%, focused funding on abstinence-only programs – spending almost \$1.5 billion on such initiatives that have not been shown to have any positive impact on health – and have recently requested additional decreases in funding for HIV prevention at CDC.”

This report notes several key findings, one of which is that more than half (53%) of new HIV infections in 2006 were among gay and bisexual men, showing that this population group is particularly hard hit by HIV/AIDS. “This report adeptly captures the unfortunate impact of HIV/AIDS among gay and bisexual men of racial and ethnic backgrounds – an impact that anecdotal studies suggested – rightfully so – was profound and problematic,” stated Congresswoman Christensen. “Obviously, future efforts to battle this epidemic must focus on greater prevention efforts directed to gay and bisexual men.”

The Congresswoman, who is the Chair of the CBC Health Braintrust and the only African-American physician in Congress, noted that, “in addition to highlighting the impact of HIV/AIDS among gay and bisexual men, the report also notes that nearly one in three (31%) new HIV infections in 2006 was the result risky heterosexual contact – a mode of HIV transmission that previous reports have documented have the greatest impact on African-American women.”

While the report unfortunately does not focus enough on HIV incidence rates among women – particularly among African-American women – it does clearly state that HIV incidence rates are disproportionately and unacceptably high among African Americans. In fact, the report also shows that while HIV incidence among African Americans has been relatively stable since the 1990’s, the rate has been stable at a disproportionately and wholly unacceptably high rate. Additionally, the report confirms that since the late 1980s, the new HIV infections among African Americans has exceeded those among whites.

“The disproportionate incidence of HIV among African Americans underscores the need to accelerate, increase and expand HIV/AIDS-related efforts – especially those that focus on prevention – in and among the African-American community,” the Congresswoman, who also is the Chair of the CBC Health Braintrust stated.

“The numbers call for a national strategic plan for the elimination of HIV/AIDS as an epidemic in this country – one that must put greater emphasis on prevention, necessarily have the Minority HIV/AIDS Initiative and a fully funded and expanded Ryan White Program at its core, and ensures that the efforts going forward follow the epidemic, be community focused, include insurance coverage and health disparities in general, and address the social determinants of health that have a negative impact on all of our health and well being.”



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“Without an emphasis on prevention – and on a comprehensive scope of prevention efforts across all racial and ethnic groups – we will never, ever win the war against HIV/AIDS in this nation,” stated the Congresswoman. “We can and must do better, and this report should serve as a national impetus that inspires us to rise to the occasion and answer that call!”

“As African-American leaders in this country, I – on behalf of my colleagues in the Congressional Black Caucus – recommit myself to a bold legislative agenda for HIV/AIDS in our and other communities of color, and once again issue our call for a State of Emergency in HIV/AIDS in our community and a commensurate response from all segments of society in this country!,” Congresswoman Christensen concluded.