



## Congress, Legislature must act to preserve drugs for HIV/AIDS

By David Satcher

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As the national and state economies continue to suffer, more than 1,000 Georgians are lining up for a crucial, life essential need.

Not for unemployment benefits this time, but for the very medications they need to survive.

The AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) provides critical antiretroviral drugs to low-income people living with HIV who do not qualify for either private insurance or Medicaid. They require these drugs to stay healthy and alive.

There have been dramatic increases in requests for the drugs due to the poor economy, unemployment rates and the high cost of the drugs.

These antiretroviral drugs have increased the health and longevity of people living with HIV for many years.

However, at this time people living with HIV are finding themselves in the same position as other Americans — uninsured or underinsured.

Due to the new increases in demand, this program has an overall budget shortfall of \$15 million.

Funding comes from both the state (\$12.5 million) and the federal government (\$33.5 million).

A waiting list for the program opened up on July 1, 2010. Today, the waiting list is more than 1,000 people.

Congress has not taken action since July to address the budget shortfall that is jeopardizing patients' access to their medications.

Instead, the Georgia General Assembly is considering more draconian budget cuts. It is unwise to use a one-size-fits-all approach to cut health care programs like ADAP. These are matters of life or death.

There are clear, economic reasons to eliminate this waiting list. It costs \$12,000 a year to provide medication through ADAP. If would-be medication recipients fall ill and need hospitalization, the increased cost to all Georgia taxpayers climbs to \$100,000 per patient. The choice is simple. We can save lives and save money.

In the past, ADAP has been a program that has received extraordinarily bipartisan support in Congress and the state Legislature. They recognized the importance of ADAP to people living with HIV as well as the taxpayers.

Recent polling in Georgia shows that the majority of voters support ADAP by 54 percent. Those identifying themselves as independent voters support ADAP funding by 58 percent.

There is no time to wait in line when a life is on the line. Congress and the Georgia General Assembly must do their part to save lives and provide funding to eliminate the waiting list for the Aids Drug Assistance Program.

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