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PRESS RELEASE

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1,431 IMPOVERISHED AIDS PATIENTS PUT ON WAITING LIST FOR TREATMENT As Funding Runs Out, 288 More Patients Wait-Listed in Last 20 Days

WASHINGTON, D.C. (June 11) – Funding has run out in 12 states to provide AIDS treatment for low-income persons, with 1,431 patients already put on waiting lists for treatments they need to save their lives – 288 of them in the last 20 days alone.

“The numbers are increasing exponentially,” William Arnold, President of the Community Access National Network (CANN), told a Congressional briefing today. “AIDS funding for the poor is in crisis.”

As of May 21, according to a periodic census of wait-listed patients conducted by the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors (NASTAD) and released today, there were 1,143 newly-diagnosed AIDS patients on wait lists in 10 different states. By June 10, funds had run out in Florida and Illinois, bringing the total number of states where funds had run out to 12 and the number of patients wait-listed had increased to 1,431.

At an emergency Capitol Hill briefing today, reporters and Congressional staff were told that increasing numbers of persons losing health coverage during the Recession and a 20% relative drop in federal funding for the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) have put uninsured and under-insured AIDS patients in what Arnold called “a freefall.”

“Even with drug-makers supplying antiretroviral (ARV) drugs at drastically reduced prices and often for free, the Recession and declining rates of federal funding are forcing low-income AIDS patients off a cliff,” he said. “Without an additional commitment from Congress and the White House, every low income individual who needs these life-saving drugs is at risk of being put at the end of the line for treatment.”

Besides Florida and Illinois, the other states that have exhausted funding for low-income AIDS patients include Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Montana, North Carolina, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming, “with other states sure to follow,” Arnold said.

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Florida alone, he predicted, will put “another 250 newly-diagnosed patients on the waiting list each and every month until this funding crisis is resolved.”

A mother of two, Elizabeth Shepherd of Charleston, South Carolina, told of how, in 1996, she was gang-raped, contracting five different strains of the HIV virus, only to be told that funding did not exist for her treatment. “I had five viruses mutating inside me, combining into a single monster that would kill me, but I was put on a wait list, as if life-saving treatment was like a vacation condo you wanted to rent.”

Funding was eventually secured for her treatment, Shepherd said, and she is now able to live a relatively normal life as long as she continues taking anti-retroviral therapies provided through ADAP.

U.S. Representative Joseph Cao (R-LA) said his home town of New Orleans has been “devastated” by the AIDS crisis, with 9,227 newly-diagnosed patients in 2007 alone.

New Orleans has the second highest number of AIDS cases, per capita, of any major American city, he explained. “A disproportionate amount of these patients are from the African-American community, which represents 60% of the population of New Orleans,” he said. Cao has sponsored legislation to increase the nation’s commitment to research and treat the disease.

Advocates are seeking an additional \$126 million in funding for the ADAP program for the current fiscal year and an additional \$244 million in 2011, but the additional emergency funding is mired in partisan wrangling in both the House and Senate.

“I’ve spent the last couple days talking to Congressmen and their staffs, and I can’t believe that they put politics ahead of people’s needs,” Shepherd said. “It’s disheartening.”