



World AIDS Day Senator Dianne Feinstein

December 1, 2006

Today is World AIDS Day. It is a time to speak out on behalf of the more than 40 million people currently living with HIV/AIDS, and to also honor the memories of the millions we have lost to this silent killer.

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a crippling and devastating epidemic that has ripped apart lives, families, and communities. This illness knows no border, no race, and no religion. It must be stopped. It is our duty as global citizens to take action.

My home State of California has truly been at the forefront of our nation's campaign to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. The first case of AIDS in our country was discovered in Los Angeles in 1981. At the time, I served as Mayor of San Francisco, and allocated \$180,000 to help fund treatments for patients afflicted with the disease.

But the disease quickly became a national epidemic; the number of cases in the United States soared from 189 in 1981 to 32,311 in 1988. By that time, funds allocated for AIDS programs in San Francisco had grown to over \$20 million, more than those appropriated by the federal government.

It is now estimated that there are over 1 million Americans living in the United States with HIV/AIDS. New advances in antiretroviral drugs show profound promise; a cumulative two million years of life have been saved as a result of the availability of these treatments in low- and middle-income nations. However, HIV/AIDS remains an incurable illness.

African-American and Hispanic populations have been disproportionately affected since the disease was first discovered in our country. African-Americans account for 54 percent of all new infections in the United States, and 64 percent of newly infected women are African-American.

14,000 people are newly infected everyday, and 95 percent of those new infections occur in developing countries. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to 64 percent of the world's 40 million HIV/AIDS cases, although the region is only home to 10 percent of the world's people. These are populations that are being truly decimated by this illness. They need our immediate assistance.

And HIV/AIDS is becoming increasingly a “young” disease; half of the 5 million people worldwide that are newly infected each year are between the ages of 15 and 24.

The discovery of AIDS brought with it a wave of discrimination, fear, and homophobia. We have slowly broken through many of these societal barriers, as we try to bring compassion and understanding of the disease to the forefront of our battle against HIV/AIDS. However, we are not there yet.

The lingering ignorance about the importance of prevention and detection is staggering. Today, the National HIV Prevention Conference estimates that one in four Americans infected with HIV is undiagnosed and unaware they are carrying the illness. This is a disturbing statistic that demonstrates how important it is to educate the public, correct common misconceptions, and encourage people to get tested.

Great advances have been made in treating patients with HIV in the United States, but progress in eradicating HIV-discrimination in health care services has lagged behind. In my home state of California, a study released this week by UCLA's Williams Institute found that 47 percent of Los Angeles nursing homes would not admit an HIV-positive patient, and one-half of the City's obstetricians and gynecologists would refuse to provide pre-natal care to a pregnant woman with HIV.

As the Senator representing the State that is home to over 100,000 people living with HIV/AIDS, and fourteen percent of all AIDS cases ever diagnosed in the United States, I believe it is my responsibility to do all I can to fight the global HIV/AIDS pandemic.

To combat AIDS in the developing world, I co-sponsored the Kennedy-Feinstein-Feingold Amendment to Help Fight HIV/AIDS, urging developing countries to use compulsory licensing to greatly increase the amount of safe, generic drugs made available to HIV/AIDS patients.

I co-sponsored the Early Treatment for HIV Acts of 2003 and 2005, ensuring that low-income HIV patients receive access to antiretroviral drugs from Medicaid before their immune systems are crippled by the disease.

When the current administration cut funding for the Ryan White CARE Act, I was among the first to criticize the President for keeping vital services from those Americans who need them the most.

There are now many campaigns and celebrities devoted to increasing awareness of and action against this disease. People like Bill and Melinda Gates; Oprah, who has donated countless hours and dollars to the people living with HIV in Africa; and Bono and Bobby Shriver who, together, raise money for the Global Fund through their RED initiative.

Many others are leading the fight against this horrific disease and making their names and faces synonymous with the cause. President Clinton founded the Clinton HIV/AIDS Initiative as a part of the Clinton Foundation in 2005. This organization is already doing wonderful work helping to save the lives of infected children. Yesterday, the Clinton Foundation reached an

agreement with Indian drug companies to provide affordable treatments to thousands of children afflicted with the AIDS virus.

Their dedication should serve as an inspiration to us all.

Today, on World AIDS Day, it is important that we come together as both Americans and as citizens of the world to declare that we will no longer tolerate inaction. We must raise the standards that we set for our community, our leaders and ourselves.

I encourage Congress and the Bush Administration not only to recognize the scope of this disease and to remember its sufferers, but also to pledge to do everything in their power to defeat it.

Tremendous scientific strides have been made to offer a better standard of living and a brighter future to many currently living with HIV/AIDS. But much more must be done to ensure this disease is eradicated. We want HIV/AIDS to become a chapter in our past, not a certainty in our future.

I will continue to fight against the growing pandemic so that all people living with HIV/AIDS can receive the best care and most advanced treatments available, regardless of the color of their skin, their sexual orientation, or their nation of origin.

Silence is approval, and as global citizens, united by the common goal of the eradication of HIV/AIDS, we cannot afford to keep our voices silent any longer.