



June 8, 2007

Rep. David Obey
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representative

Rep. David Lewis
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives

Dear Chairman Obey, Ranking Member Lewis and Members of the Appropriations Committee:

We are writing on behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to express deep concern regarding developments in the House Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs that have altered the PEPFAR-mandated allocation for “abstinence-until-marriage” funding and rescinded the Mexico City Protocol. These changes, unless reversed, threaten to undermine our nation’s efforts to fight HIV and AIDS around the world through the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

The Catholic Church is deeply committed to U.S. leadership on this issue. At home and around the world, and particularly through the experience of CRS in 12 of the 15 PEPFAR focus countries, the Church is deeply involved in offering life-saving help to people, principally in Africa, threatened by HIV and AIDS. This is not about ideology; it’s about the best ways to save lives. In this common effort, we would urge the following steps to advance the US commitment to address the spread of HIV and AIDS:

Do not abandon the consensus that underpins U.S. leadership

PEPFAR, at its heart, is about coming to the aid of some of our most vulnerable sisters and brothers. The strategy enshrined in the PEPFAR legislation was carefully negotiated and reflects a consensus on how to best proceed and about what works in HIV and AIDS prevention. Altering this approach through the Appropriations process, rather than through the process of reauthorizing PEPFAR, seems premature and counter-productive.

USCCB was a major supporter of this new initiative when it was first announced in 2003. Since then, USCCB and CRS have been actively engaged in education and advocacy to support major new investments in the U.S. commitment to fight the global pandemic. As we head into the reauthorization of PEPFAR, attempts to abandon the current approach will seriously weaken the consensus needed to expand US leadership on this issue.

We strongly urge the Committee to retain designated funding for prevention of sexually transmitted HIV through abstinence and fidelity education

We understand that the mark-up of legislation as proposed by the subcommittee sets aside the requirement that 33 percent of 20 percent of the funds appropriated for HIV prevention be dedicated to “abstinence-until marriage.” There is a global shortage of funding available for this critical and effective method of prevention of sexually-transmitted HIV.

Page Two

Letter to Chairman Obey, Ranking Member Lewis and Committee
June 8, 2007

Since 2003, CRS has been one of the largest and most successful partners in PEPFAR. CRS currently has PEPFAR-supported operations in 12 of the 15 focus countries. In its extensive experience and in the documented experience of others, only an approach to sexually-transmitted HIV prevention that has sufficient funding for groups to conduct abstinence and faithfulness education has yielded meaningful advances in stopping the spread of HIV. Evidence shows that the HIV and AIDS prevalence rates in at least 7 of the 15 PEPFAR Focus Countries are declining – and in every such case, there is a significant decline in the reported numbers of sexual partners (“B”- be faithful) and a significant decline in the number of unmarried youth aged 15–24 who are sexually active (“A” – abstinence).

There is no evidence that an increase in the use of condoms solely contributed to the decline in the rate of AIDS cases. Indeed, our experience over the past several years leads us to strongly reaffirm the need for designated funding for abstinence before marriage, funding that was virtually non-existent before PEPFAR. Without funding for such programs, human lives, particularly in Africa, may be further threatened.

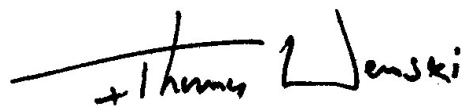
Reinstate the “Mexico City” Protocol

We also understand that in the subcommittee mark, organizations involved in performing and promoting abortion will be allowed to receive and distribute condoms as well as other contraceptives. Given the fungibility of resources, we fully expect resources for abortion provision to increase among these organizations as a result of the subcommittee’s action. We urge you to delete the provisions reversing the “Mexico City” protocol when the full Appropriations Committee meets. From the Church’s extensive experience in PEPFAR-focus countries, condoms are already widely available at little or no cost – there is certainly no justification for now channeling their provision through abortion-promoting groups.

You and your Committee have responded to the health needs of the poor around the world with generosity. We ask that you ensure that the full Appropriations Committee mark does not alter either the PEPFAR-mandated allocation for “abstinence-until-marriage” funding or the Mexico City Protocol. We urge you to fully fund this important investment in preventing HIV infections and saving lives, and not let it be side-tracked into diversionary battles. This is the time for new investment, not for fighting old ideological battles.

With appreciation for your continued support for addressing the critical health needs of the poor around the world, we remain,

Sincerely yours,



Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski
Bishop of Orlando
Chairman, Committee on International
Policy



Ken Hackett
President, CRS