

Dear President Obama,

We salute your commitment to federal funding of syringe exchange, which you recently reaffirmed in the debut of the revamped White House website.

We now ask you to call on Congress to strike the language banning federal funding for syringe exchange from the FY 2009 Appropriations Omnibus bill. We also ask that your budget specifically call on Congress to allow funding in the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations bill to be used for syringe exchange when you submit the FY 2010 budget to Congress. Taking action now to remove the ban in the FY '09 Omnibus is the most expeditious route to allow cities and states the needed flexibility to tailor existing federal funding streams to fight deadly infectious diseases based on the needs and conditions of local communities.

In recent years, the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations bill includes a provision stating that “no funds appropriated in this Act shall be used to carry out any program of distributing sterile needles or syringes for the hypodermic injection of any illegal drug” (Title V, Sec. 505). Congress needs a clear directive from the White House to strike this language and allow local flexibility in the design and implementation of programs to prevent HIV and other infectious diseases.

Injection drug use remains a major driver of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States, and the leading cause of new hepatitis C infections. Abundant research, endorsed by the findings of eight federally commissioned reviews, has conclusively demonstrated that syringe exchange is effective in reducing the transmission of HIV without increasing drug use. Syringe exchange programs currently operate in 36 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, but can only meet a fraction of the need due to the federal funding ban. Existing syringe exchange programs provide a growing range of critical health services, education, and support to vulnerable groups otherwise denied access to timely health care. Moreover, such programs serve as a crucial link for countless substance users to addiction treatment and recovery programs through counseling and case management. The ban on federal funds has had international repercussions as well, unnecessarily hampering our ability to assist countries experiencing explosive HIV/AIDS epidemics driven by injection drug use.

In 2007, Congress took an initial step by striking the Appropriations provision that had restricted the District of Columbia from using its own funds for syringe exchange. This action has resulted in new and expanded programs better poised to halt the devastating HIV/AIDS epidemic in the nation's capital. Strong leadership now can extend this promising sign of progress to the rest of the country.

We've learned a lot about syringe exchange since the federal funding ban was originally enacted. It's time for the federal government to use every tool at its disposal to arrest the further spread of HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C.

Signed,

ACT UP Philadelphia

AIDS Action

AIDS Foundation of Chicago

American Medical Students Association

amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research

California Hepatitis Alliance (CalHEP)

Caring Ambassadors Program, Inc.

Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP)

FAIR Foundation

Harm Reduction Coalition

Health GAP

Housing Works

National Alliance of State & Territorial AIDS Directors

National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA)

National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable

Physicians for Human Rights

Project Inform

..and other organizations to be announced.