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## **\*New Congress Sets Stage for Stemming African American AIDS Epidemic**

### **Oakland Conference on Harm Reduction Imperative Starts Today\***

Oakland, CA - Over 1500 people gather today for a national conference organized by the Harm Reduction Coalition to discuss syringe exchange and comprehensive public health strategies to reduce harms associated with drug use in the heart of California's growing HIV/AIDS epidemic amongst African Americans.

The conference, "Drug User Health: The Personal and Political", highlights the innovative work of Oakland and Bay Area programs, while examining continued political barriers to improving drug user health in California and the nation. In 1998, US Representative Barbara Lee led efforts to declare a State of Emergency in Alameda County in hopes of focusing a targeted response to the rising HIV/AIDS epidemic in the African American community. However, since 1989 a federal ban on funding syringe exchange, enacted yearly by Congress, restricts crucial resources needed to prevent disease, and the epidemic continues to spread.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the sharing of syringes during injection drug use has directly and indirectly accounted for more than one-third (36 percent) of AIDS cases in the United States. Among African-Americans, up to 42 percent of males and 51 percent of females with AIDS are linked to injection drug use. Rigorous scientific research proves that improving access to sterile syringes through needle exchange programs reduces the transmission of HIV and Hepatitis C, without increasing drug use.

Syringe exchange is widely accepted as part of the HIV prevention landscape. Yet, the ban on federal funding results in too few programs, limited hours and services, and a dependence on decreasing private philanthropy. This political obstacle severely constrains the single most effective strategy for preventing HIV transmission in adults, and disproportionately fuels the growing African American AIDS epidemic.

According to Allan Clear, Executive Director of the Harm Reduction Coalition, "There's been a groundswell of legislative support on the state level for syringe access - both syringe exchange programs and over-the-counter pharmacy sales - across the country, in states like California, New Jersey, Delaware, and Massachusetts. We're ready to harness this momentum nationally and tackle the federal ban on syringe exchange funding."

Conference-goers are heartened by the opportunities to revisit and challenge federal barriers to syringe exchange afforded by the political shifts in Congress. Advocates in California and across the country will rededicate themselves this week to pushing elected officials to prioritize drug user health through initiatives on HIV, hepatitis C, and overdose prevention.