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INTERNATIONAL NGO, GAIA, CALLS ADMINISTRATION CUTS TO PROGRAMS FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS TRAGIC FOR THOSE AROUND THE WORLD WHO WILL DIE WITHOUT TREATMENT

--GAIA Toolkit Helps Constituents Ask Congress to Maintain or Increase Funding to End the AIDS Epidemic--

June 5, 2017 (San Rafael, CA) -- Last week, the Trump administration released its fiscal year 2018 budget proposal, which includes a nearly 20 percent cut in funding for HIV/AIDS treatment programs, including the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), founded in 2003 by President George W. Bush, supported and expanded during the Obama administration, and widely credited with saving millions of lives during 15 years of steady global progress against HIV/AIDS. The budget, now headed to Congress, proposes to reduce funding for PEPFAR by about \$1.1 billion, down from \$6 billion received last year. Much U.S. government funding for AIDS treatment comes through PEPFAR and, in 2016, PEPFAR-funded programs ensured that almost 12 million people (of the 18.2 million on treatment) had access to life-saving HIV treatment, nearly two million babies were born HIV-free to infected mothers, and more than six million orphans and vulnerable children received care and support. The Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR) estimates that the administration's proposed cuts could cost more than a million lives and orphan more than 300,000 children.

"News that the current administration is proposing significant cuts to AIDS funding globally is tragic for the people around the world who will die, their families and communities, and for the incredible progress made toward breaking the epidemic," says Todd Schafer, CEO of GAIA. "These cuts would not just stall progress, they would actually spark a massive increase in HIV incidence and continued death and devastation around the world." As a secular, non-governmental organization working to end the AIDS epidemic in Malawi, one of the poorest countries on the planet and an AIDS hotspot, the Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance (GAIA) is working to raise awareness of how the budget cuts would impact progress against the disease.

"We stand at a historic time when ending AIDS is within reach, thanks largely to PEPFAR and efforts to make medications widely available in the developing world," added Schafer. "The UNAIDS strategy to end AIDS requires not just maintaining current funding and treatment levels, but actually increasing the number of people on treatment." In a briefing last week, the U.S. State Department reported that all people currently on treatment will be able to continue, but how that would be possible given the proposed cuts was unclear and how new and newly detected infections around the world would be treated was not addressed. "That means the deadliest epidemic in human history, increasingly under control, will come roaring back if funding for medications and prevention programs runs dry," he said.

The UNAIDS strategy to end AIDS by 2030 requires meeting the "90-90-90" HIV treatment targets. This means that 90 percent of people living with HIV must know their status, 90 percent of those must go onto treatment, and 90 percent of those must achieve viral suppression via careful adherence to the regimen. If these targets are met, according to UNAIDS, we can reach a tipping point in the epidemic.

“Prior to the time of antiretroviral therapy, we saw very productive professional people, our relatives and friends, losing weight slowly with no hope of treatment. Nobody wanted to shake hands with someone who was infected with HIV, patients were isolated in a separate ward for fear of transmitting the infection and some infected individuals committed suicide, for they could not bear the stigma and discrimination,” says Joyce Jere, RN, MPH, GAIA’s Malawi Country Director. “Everyday the villages buried a loved one leaving so many children without parents. Many of these orphaned children were also infected with HIV, which made it too hard for the grandparents to take care of them. Today, these same children who were put on treatment while young have grown up and they need support to ensure that they live a quality life, and this can only be achieved with adequate funding for continued education, prevention, treatment and care.”

Despite concerns about meeting 90-90-90 in remote, rural areas of Africa, in Malawi where GAIA works, progress is solid, at 73-89-91. “GAIA’s work confirms that achieving 90-90-90 is possible in even the most challenging settings, but the window of opportunity will not remain open indefinitely,” says Schafer. “The key is to achieve the tipping point before the wind shifts, which is why you’ve heard bipartisan calls for maintenance and expansion of PEPFAR funding in the Trump administration budget.” **People interested in voicing their opinion about budget priorities related to AIDS treatment programs and funding for PEPFAR, can visit www.thegaia.org for a toolkit and link to find your Congressperson (<http://www.house.gov/representatives/find/>).**

About GAIA

GAIA is a secular 501(c)(3) organization founded in 2000 in response to the global HIV/AIDS epidemic. Its mission is to develop and implement innovative and caring healthcare programs in resource-deprived regions in Africa, especially those most affected by HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. To ensure the broadest possible impact, we rigorously test initiatives and promote the replication of successful models. GAIA programs aim to achieve UNAIDS 90-90-90 HIV targets in rural, remote Malawi by 2020 -- 90% of people living with HIV know their status; 90% of those are on treatment; and 90% of those are virally suppressed, or noninfectious -- a “treatment as prevention” strategy to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030. For more information visit www.thegaia.org.

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Background and resources:

1. GAIA 90-90-90 HIV Treatment Targets Graphic
https://www.dropbox.com/s/odo7rioz2qpw0yr/GAIA_Poster_042317.pdf?dl=0
2. A Historic Moment to End AIDS, How we Will Do it, and the Critical Role of PEPFAR Funding, Huffington Post, May 24, 2017
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-historic-moment-to-end-aids-how-we-will-do-it-and_us_5925e60fe4b090bac9d46b1a?ncid=engmodushpimg00000003
3. Cuts to AIDS Treatment Programs Could Cost a Million Lives, New York Times, May 23, 2017
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/world/africa/cuts-to-aids-treatment-programs-could-cost-a-million-lives.html?ref=politics&utm_source=huffingtonpost.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=pubexchange_article&r=0
4. On-the-Record-Briefing: The President's Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Request for the U.S. Department of State and USAID
<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/05/271058.htm>
5. Bill Frist: The Case for Keeping America’s AIDS Relief Plan, New York Times, Feb. 9, 2017
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/09/opinion/bill-frist-the-case-for-keeping-americas-aids-relief-plan.html?_r=0