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As the spread of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, which causes the disease COVID-19, continues across the country and around the world, many people living with HIV are understandably concerned about how this virus may affect them and the communities they call home. The populations most at risk of serious complications from COVID-19 — including death — are older adults and individuals with chronic health conditions, including compromised immune systems.<sup>1</sup> The undersigned 90 organizations engaged in the local, state, and national response to HIV call on federal decisionmakers to acknowledge the increased risk of COVID-19 illness and death faced by many people living with HIV and to craft a relief package that takes the unique needs of this population into account.

During a presentation about COVID-19 at the 2020 Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections, Dr. John Brooks, Senior Medical Advisor for the Division of HIV/AIDS Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said that people living with HIV who have a low CD4 count and/or a detectable viral load are at potential higher risk of developing more serious illness from COVID-19 as a result.<sup>2</sup>

Given that only 53% of people living with HIV in the United States have an undetectable viral load<sup>3</sup> and that 60% of the people living with HIV in the United States are age 50 or older,<sup>4</sup> a large swath of the U.S. population living with HIV is at great risk during the rapid spread of COVID-19. Ensuring the health and safety of people living with HIV in the United States goes beyond providing universal access to health care. Housing is one of the strongest predictors of their access to treatment, their health outcomes, and how long they will live.<sup>5</sup> To obtain and benefit from life-saving HIV treatments, people living with HIV must have safe, stable housing. Food insecurity has been associated with increased HIV transmission risk, inability to maintain regular medical appointments, poor antiretroviral therapy (ART) uptake and adherence, poor immunological and virological responses, lower efficacy of ART, and high mortality.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), People at Risk for Serious Illness from COVID-19, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/high-risk-complications.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections 2020, <https://special.croi.capitalreach.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> CDC, HIV in the United States: *At A Glance*, <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/overview/ata glance.html>.

<sup>4</sup> CDC, Estimated HIV Incidence and Prevalence in the United States 2010–2016, <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/library/reports/surveillance/cdc-hiv-surveillance-supplemental-report-vol-24-1.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> National AIDS Housing Coalition, Housing is Healthcare, <http://nationalaidshousing.org/housing-and-health/>.

<sup>6</sup> The Lancet HIV, The syndemic threat of food insecurity and HIV, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanhiv/article/PIIS2352-3018\(20\)30004-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanhiv/article/PIIS2352-3018(20)30004-7/fulltext).

**When crafting a relief package in response to COVID-19, Congress must take into account the unique needs of people living with HIV to ensure their continued safety, health, and well-being.**

*We support the current relief package proposed in the U.S. House of Representatives, H.R. 6201, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act* — free coronavirus testing for everyone who needs a test, including the uninsured; paid emergency leave with both 14 days of paid sick leave and up to three months of paid family and medical leave; enhanced Unemployment Insurance, a first step that will extend protections to furloughed workers; strengthened food security initiatives, including SNAP, student meals, seniors nutrition, and food banks; clear protections for frontline workers, including health care workers and other workers who are in contact with those who have been exposed or are responsible for cleaning at-risk places; and increased federal funds for Medicaid, as states face increased costs — **but it doesn't go far enough.**

Missing from this package and what must be included in relief considerations going forward are:

- Mandated public, daily reporting on COVID-19 testing, incidence, prevalence, and related death;
- Accessible and scaled testing measures in order to provide sufficient surveillance; explicit, universal protocols for presumptive positives awaiting confirmatory tests; and reporting on the number of presumptive positives;
- Waivers of refill limits on maintenance drugs, inclusive of antiretrovirals, for people with chronic conditions like HIV and hepatitis;
- Explicit authorization for and coverage of telemedicine for COVID-19 care;
- Flexibility with funds and associated deliverables for recipient organizations of federal grants, cooperative agreements, and other awards;
- Rental and mortgage assistance for workers whose income streams are diminished or eliminated by mandatory closures;
- Suspensions on utility disconnections and eviction and foreclosure proceedings;
- Suspension of student loan debt payments;
- Prevention of overcrowding in public institutions, including the release of all individuals currently in jails, prisons, pretrial holding facilities, and immigration detention who have not been convicted of a crime involving physical or sexual violence;
- Moratorium on implementation of the public charge rule so immigrant communities aren't discouraged from accessing COVID-19 testing and care;
- Incentives for banks, debt collectors, and other financial institutions to cease collections activity and interest accrual until epidemic control is achieved;
- Use of the National Disaster Medical System to cover uninsured people with Medicare for any recommended care;
- Temporary increase of the Federal Medicaid Assistance Percentage;
- Additional and accelerated funding for treatment and vaccine research; and
- Commitment to free access to treatment and vaccination, once identified.

A pandemic with the scope of COVID-19 requires a decisive, robust response, and the recommendations above will move the United States closer to epidemic control and containment at an accelerated pace, avoid potentially millions of cases of COVID-19, and

prevent hundreds of thousands of deaths. The continued safety, health, and well-being of everyone in the United States, especially those living with HIV, rests in the hands of a comprehensive response, and the time to act is now.

Please reach out to Alex Vance, Senior Policy Manager, at [avance@aidsunited.org](mailto:avance@aidsunited.org) with any questions.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Carl Baloney, Jr." in a cursive script.

Carl Baloney, Jr.  
Vice President for Policy and Advocacy  
AIDS United

ADAP Advocacy Association  
Afiya Center; TX Black Women's Health Initiative;  
African American Health Alliance  
AIDS Action Baltimore  
AIDS Alabama  
AIDS Alliance for Women, Infants, Children, Youth & Families  
AIDS Foundation of Chicago  
AIDS Project Rhode Island  
AIDS United  
American Academy of HIV Medicine  
APLA Health  
Black AIDS Institute  
Black Women's Health Imperative  
Callen-Lorde Community Health Center  
CARES of Southwest Michigan  
Cascade AIDS Project  
Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation  
Cero VIH Puerto Rico  
Christie's Place  
Clare Housing  
Collaborative Solutions  
Community Access National Network (CANN)  
Community Education Group  
Counter Narrative Project  
CrescentCare  
Delaware HIV Consortium  
Desert AIDS Project  
END HIV Houston  
Equality California  
Equality Federation

Equality North Carolina  
Equitas Health  
Equity Forward  
A Family Affair  
GLAAD  
GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality  
Global Justice Institute  
GMHC  
God's Love We Deliver, Inc.  
Harm Reduction Coalition  
Health Services Center, Inc.  
HealthHIV  
Hispanic Health Network  
HIV + Aging Research Project--Palm Springs  
HIV AIDS Alliance of Michigan  
HIV Medicine Association  
HIV Modernization Movement-Indiana  
HIVenas Abiertas  
Housing Works  
Howard Brown Health  
Human Rights Campaign  
Hyacinth AIDS Foundation  
iHealth  
Latino Commission on AIDS  
Legacy Community Health  
Los Angeles LGBT Center  
Movimiento en Respuesta al VIH  
My Brother's Keeper  
NAHEWD  
Nashville CARES  
NASTAD  
National Center for Transgender Equality  
National Coalition for LGBT Health  
National Coalition of STD Directors  
National Working Positive Coalition  
NMAC  
North Carolina AIDS Action Network  
Paciente de SIDA pro Politica Sana  
PFLAG National  
Positive Women's Network-USA (National)  
Positive Women's Network-USA: Ohio Chapter  
Prevention Access Campaign  
Pride Media, publisher of Out, The Advocate, Plus, Pride, and OutTraveler  
Puerto Rico CoNCRA  
San Francisco AIDS Foundation  
Silver State Equality-Nevada  
SisterLove

Southern AIDS Coalition  
Tennessee AIDS Advocacy Network  
The AIDS Institute  
The Professional Association of Social Workers in HIV/AIDS  
The Well Project  
TPAN, publisher of Positively Aware  
TRANScending Barriers  
Treatment Action Group  
U.S. People Living with HIV Caucus  
UNIFIED-HIV Health and Beyond  
Vivent Health  
Waves Ahead Corp  
Whitman-Walker Health