

Remarks – 25 Years of AIDS

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(OAPP)**

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Good afternoon; Bueno Tardes:

Welcome and thank you for finding the time to be here today as we mark the 25 years of the first reported case of AIDS. I am Mario Pérez, Interim Director of the Los Angeles County Office of AIDS Programs and Policy.

I want to especially thank Dr. Jonathan Fielding, Director of Public Health and Health Officer for Los Angeles County. His kind words, acknowledging our collective commitment to this fight, and his presence today are welcome reassurances that the needs of HIV/AIDS are public health priorities in our County. In addition, I'd like to thank our HIV Prevention Planning Committee and our Commission on HIV and its Executive Director, Craig-Vincent Jones for their tireless commitment to planning for an evermore responsive HIV/AIDS strategy.

Before we proceed I ask you to join me in a 25-second silence to mark our collective loss to this epidemic in Los Angeles County. This will be followed by a short evocation.

—*A minute of silence is observed ...*

—Gong evocation follows ...

Thank you for your silence.

Thank you John Joo for those soothing sounds.

We need them.

We need these decibels to make us sound as we mourn the catastrophic worldwide loss of more than 25 million men, women and children to HIV/AIDS.

We welcome their wholesome vibrations as we honor the memory of the nearly 30,000 family members, friends, lovers and neighbors who have succumbed to this epidemic in our Los Angeles County community.

We appreciate their comforting effect for the 58,000 children, men and women who still live with HIV or AIDS in the County.

Today, the sounds also resonate as agents of awareness. A wake up call for the estimated 15,000 individuals who are infected with HIV in Los Angeles County but who are not yet aware of their status. They serve as a reminder for each and every one of us to take the HIV test and know our status today.

Our quarter century of struggles against this epidemic, efforts that are themselves lessons in the cycles of extremes, have gone on too long. Initial helplessness fed despair, but ultimately paved the way for significant successes. Today, those initial successes have spawned new challenges that threaten further efforts with deep frustration.

You will recall the pervasive fear, the panic, and the sadness that followed the identification of a seemingly breaking disease at the UCLA Medical Center. That disease initially took the lives of five gay men.

On June 5, 1981, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) acknowledged this outbreak and issued its first warning about a relatively rare form of pneumonia among a cluster of gay men in Los Angeles. By the beginning of July 1981, a total of 452 cases in 23 states had been reported to the CDC.

We can all remember a time when a few years ago, the life expectancy of a person diagnosed with AIDS was measured in months. It was then not unusual to be able to do nothing and watch hopelessly as friends, colleagues, lovers and family members died of AIDS. At that time, many of us here today collectively pooled resources to understand, and to respond to the frightening outbreak.

Sadly and despite our best efforts, a full 25 years later, the United Nations is reporting 65 million HIV infections worldwide at an approximate rate of 10 new infections somewhere in the world every 60 seconds.

These are indeed somber times for those of us in the HIV/AIDS community. It is a time of hard realization that two and a half

decades of valiant efforts have neither fully prevented the spread of HIV nor yielded a cure for AIDS!

Certainly, some glimmers of hope abound:

- Current medical advances have made it possible for many people to live longer and productive lives with HIV/AIDS.
- We have also learned about behaviors that put people at risk for HIV infection.
- We continue to learn about the social conditions underlying these behaviors.

However, despite our many successes, our war on HIV/AIDS is still challenged on many fronts:

- At one time, the general perception was that HIV infection followed a simple logic. If you have HIV, then you are gay. If you are not gay, then you can't contract HIV. Fortunately that perception no longer

holds. Across the country however, and also in Los Angeles County, HIV is increasingly an equal opportunity infection.

- In recent years, the HIV epidemic has undergone dramatic changes shifting the burden of the disease to our minority communities. In Los Angeles County, despite their relatively smaller number, African Americans have the highest case rate of any racial or ethnic group. Latinos and Latinas account for the majority of new AIDS cases countywide. Most children infected countywide with HIV are African-American and Latino.
- Twenty-five years of diligent research and funding have failed to bring a cure or vaccine for HIV/AIDS.
- The prospects of shrinking funds for our programs appear more imminent at a time of increasing demand

for services from the community. Many of us here are aware of the latest information out of Washington on the reauthorization of the Ryan White CARE Act, the main source of federal funding for our various programs. Those federal funds, which have remained relatively flat, may even be shrinking further. You must be deeply alarmed by the threat of shifting needed resources away from national HIV epicenters like Los Angeles to areas of emerging HIV epidemics without a wholesale discussion of ensuring that appropriation levels keep pace with burden.

There is no doubt that we face increasing health care needs, and increasingly complex service systems at the same time that we face fiscal challenges at the local, state and federal levels.

As the AIDS epidemic shifts and grows, it has become more challenging to identify the areas of need and to craft solutions most likely to address them in the face of shrinking funds.

It is now vitally important in this rapidly changing environment, amid dwindling resources and ever growing needs, that we build and nurture the capacity to serve.

We must re-ignite the passion and courage that has served us so well throughout those early stages of this epidemic.

We need to recall the voices of those whom we have lost to this disease and listen to the voices of those people still living with HIV.

And we must intensify efforts to prevent new HIV infections, and take better care of those living with AIDS.

I want to thank you all for your services over the years. I want to thank you for your daily deep care and commitment. But I must remind you that our job is not yet done.

The war against HIV/AIDS in Los Angeles County is not over. From the Antelope Valley to Alhambra, this war is not over. This war is not over in Baldwin Hills, not in Boyle Heights, not in our Beach communities. It is not over in the Crenshaw District, not in

Chinatown and certainly not in Compton, and downtown L.A. It is not over in Watts, not in Whittier, and certainly not in West Hollywood.

I stand before you this afternoon to ask you to join me in a renewed fight against the march of HIV/AIDS in Los Angeles County.

I know and believe that with your help, with your commitment, one day we shall overcome.

Gracias.