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## **AIDS Action Applauds Introduction of a New Bill Allowing Federal Funds to Support Syringe Exchange Programs**

WASHINGTON, July 30, 2008 -- On Thursday, July 30<sup>th</sup>, Representative Jose Serrano (D-NY) introduced the Community AIDS and Hepatitis Prevention Act, a bill which, if passed, will remove all legal barriers to States and local jurisdictions to spend federal funding that they receive for prevention of diseases directly on syringe exchange. Syringe exchanges are a method of HIV prevention which helps intravenous drug users attain clean syringes in order to prevent sharing syringes that are potentially infected with HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis and other bloodborne diseases. A letter with 147 local and national, community, substance abuse, viral hepatitis, HIV, syringe exchange, and public health organizations, as varied as The Episcopal Church, the Office of Communicable Disease Control and Epidemiology in the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, the Hispanic Federation and many more, was also released in support of the bill (see attached).

“If passed this bill will ensure that states and local communities will be able to make their own decisions about preventing HIV and hepatitis C based on the scientific evidence without political interference from the federal government, said Ronald Johnson, Deputy Executive Director of AIDS Action. “Since there are more than 200 communities throughout the United States that already rely on syringe exchange programs with little problem, this is a welcome development.”

Eight federally funded research reports concluded that needle and syringe programs, as part of a comprehensive HIV prevention strategy, are an effective public health intervention that reduces HIV transmission without increasing the use of illicit drugs. Research has also shown that syringe programs are important in preventing hepatitis C transmission. The federal government certified in 1998 that syringe exchange reduces the transmission of HIV infections and does not raise the level of drug abuse. Transmission of HIV related to intravenous drug use continues to be a major issue. In 2006, the most recent year for which data is available, there were nearly 16,000 HIV/AIDS cases were reported, representing approximately 17% of the epidemic.

Introduction of the bill is an important signal that Congress is ready to begin talking about ensuring that the United States enacts the most effective, evidence based HIV and

hepatitis C prevention programs possible. Congress indicated some readiness for this issue by passing a law that removed a ban on the District of Columbia's use of its own local tax funds for syringe exchange in December 2007. The use of federal funding for syringe exchange has been banned since 1988 in various forms.

"AIDS Action applauds and thanks Representative Serrano and all of the other original cosponsors of this bill," said Johnson. "Preventing HIV infection through syringe exchange is a truly non-partisan issue that deserves careful review and support from all Members of Congress. We urge all Representatives to sign on as co-sponsors and commit the U.S. to following an evidence-based prevention program."

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*AIDS Action strives to end the HIV epidemic by advancing public policies that prevent new infections, provide care for people living with HIV, and support the search for a cure. AIDS Action serves as the national voice for AIDS service organizations, health departments, and a diverse network of community-based organizations across the country that provide services for people living with or affected by HIV infection.*