Government Whistleblower Exposes Reality of US Prevention Policy

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Washington, DC, December 13, 2005-An anonymous US government official involved in HIV/AIDS programs has leaked to the press a document that reveals how far the US government intends to go in funding abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. The document directs US programs to reserve 66% of government funding for prevention of sexual transmission of HIV for programs that promote abstinence and faithfulness.

A new analysis released today shows that the directive codifies a trend already under way. The Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) has documented US government spending on HIV prevention during 2004 and 2005 on a country-by-country basis, as well as a reduction in US distribution of condoms. (Click here for CHANGE's press release.) Its analysis shows that 56% of funding for the prevention of sexual transmission of HIV over these years went to abstinence-only-until-marriage and faithfulness programs.

The leaked document (download page 4 and 5, below), the FY2006 Country Operation Plan (COP) Guidance for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), insists that programs must not go below the 66% level and that "there will be no exceptions to this requirement."

On December 10, the Baltimore Sun reported that a government official provided the leaked document because of a concern that US international HIV prevention efforts would be hindered by the policy.

The European Union issued a strongly worded statement on December 1, 2005, implicitly criticizing the US approach. It stated, "We are profoundly concerned about the resurgence of partial or incomplete messages on HIV prevention which are not grounded in evidence and have limited effectiveness. We, the European Union, firmly believe that, to be successful, HIV prevention must utilize all approaches known to be effective, not implementing one or a few selective actions in isolation." (Click here to read an article about the EU's statement.)

Condoms should be widely distributed, but not only, as required by the US, to narrowly defined risk groups. Evidence from Zimbabwe, just released by UNAIDS, shows that increased condom use can help reduce the number of new infections in a generalized epidemic. Critics of the US strategy do not, however, advocate a "condom-only approach." A range of approaches need to be used, including encouragement of safer behaviors and greater financial independence for women.

"As an African Christian I want to see a balanced approach that empowers people to choose what's right for them, based on their circumstances." said Pauline Muchina, a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and Board member of the Global AIDS Alliance.