



THE AIDS INSTITUTE

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*For Immediate Release* 5.22.06

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## Candlelight Vigil Provides Renewed Focus on HIV/AIDS Issues

Washington, DC - More than 200 advocates participated in this year's International AIDS Candlelight Memorial on Sunday, May 21 in Washington, DC, taking part in a moving and poignant ceremony to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS and remember all of those who have died from HIV disease in Washington and throughout the world.

The candlelight memorial, a program of the Global Health Council began in San Francisco in 1983 and is now commemorated in 93 countries, making it the largest and one of the most successful grassroots events in the world. This year's candlelight vigil carried an even deeper significance because it took place just a few weeks before the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first recorded AIDS cases.

"Twenty-five years into this global pandemic, and we are remembering the lives and deaths of millions of people," said Dr. Gene Copello, Executive Director of The AIDS Institute, which co-sponsored the Washington event with eight other organizations. "The International AIDS Candlelight Memorial serves as a way for all of us to remember those who have suffered and died from this insidious virus, but it also gives us the opportunity to re-energize and refocus our efforts on ending AIDS now."

The Washington event began early Sunday evening at the Frank Reeves Municipal Center in Northwest, Washington, where speakers told very personal and emotional stories about their battles with HIV and AIDS and how it has impacted the lives of their families. Program participants, in a show of unity, then marched to the African-American Civil War Museum on U Street, standing outside in a semi-circle in front of a Civil War memorial as Frank Oldham, Jr., the newly installed Executive Director of the National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA), urged the White House to adopt AIDS as a "personal issue."

"I very publicly appeal to President Bush and First Lady Laura Bush to make AIDS in America a priority for the First Lady," said Oldham, who provided opening remarks for the outside part of the candlelight vigil. "We need her support and her compassion to end AIDS in America."

Other speakers - including Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District of Columbia Delegate to the US House of Representatives and Linda Cropp, Chair of the District of Columbia City Council - decried the high rates of HIV/AIDS in Washington's African-American community and called for greater education and prevention efforts to stop the spread of HIV and AIDS. The District of Columbia has the highest incidence of AIDS cases in the country.

Dr. Marsha Martin, Senior Deputy Director of the Department of Health's Administration for HIV Policy and Programs in Washington, and members of the Metro Teen AIDS Activists, read the names of district residents who have died from AIDS since 2000, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Program participants responded by lighting candles, illuminating the night with a heartfelt remembrance.

Jeanne White-Ginder, the mother of the late Ryan White for whom the Ryan White CARE Act is named, spoke of her family's long battle against AIDS in the 1980s. Also a board member of The AIDS Institute, White-Ginder also talked about the epidemic's disproportionate impact on people of color. White-Ginder, the closing speaker for the evening, urged people with HIV and AIDS to "tell their stories" to members of Congress and to the public.

"That is the best educational tool that we have - seeing real people with real faces of this epidemic," she said.

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For more information and to become involved in AIDS advocacy work, please contact The AIDS Institute at: (202) 835-8373, or by email at: [Info@theaidsinstitute.org](mailto:Info@theaidsinstitute.org) or [www.TheAIDSInstitute.org](http://www.TheAIDSInstitute.org)

The AIDS Institute is a national nonprofit agency that promotes action for social change through public policy research, advocacy and education.