My name is Rachel Klein, Health Policy Manager at The AIDS Institute, and I thank you for allowing me to provide public comments on behalf of The AIDS Institute.

We congratulate you all on your appointments to PACHA and commend HHS for re-establishing PACHA which is an important tool for engaging outside interests in policy decisions, including people living with and at risk of HIV.

The AIDS Institute believes PACHA is especially critical at this juncture because the federal government is actively engaged in two important projects – updating the National HIV/AIDS Strategy, and planning for implementation of the new Ending the HIV Epidemic Plan. For many years, The AIDS Institute has said that ending the epidemic is possible if we have proper leadership and a commitment to increasing resources in order to expand effective treatment and prevention tools. When the Plan was announced, we were excited that the highest levels of government agreed with the HIV community that ending the epidemic is within reach.

On Monday, the President’s budget proposed $291 million for programs throughout HHS to fund this Plan, and we commend the Administration for demonstrating its commitment to achieving the ambitious goal of ending the epidemic with this proposal. The AIDS Institute supports the Plan and will work with Congress to ensure funds are appropriated for this program this year as well as in coming fiscal years. The HIV infection rate has plateaued in recent years because we have not increased investments in HIV programs, and this Plan will kickstart reductions in the new infection rate by targeting resources where they are needed most. We thank the many principals at HHS who presented more information about the Plan during this meeting, and trust that HHS will continue to engage with the community, especially with the jurisdictions who would be the focus of this Plan. If we are able to increase funding and ensure that the Plan is sustained through the next ten years, we believe we can reach the goal of ending the epidemic in our lifetime.
However, ending the epidemic will take more than just the additional funding proposed in this Plan. We simply cannot end the epidemic if there are funding cuts and harmful policy changes made to programs that serve people living with and at risk of HIV infection. The President’s budget proposed a $63 million cut to the Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS program, which provides essential housing support for low-income people living with HIV. The Administration has also proposed significant changes and funding reductions to Medicare, Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act, all of which are critical for access to lifesaving care and treatment. We urge the administration to recognize that these harmful policy proposals, if allowed to go into effect, will obstruct the success of the Ending the Epidemic Plan. The AIDS Institute will continue to fight back against any policy proposals that would hurt the health of people in our community.

Additionally, The AIDS Institute would like to encourage PACHA to examine and prioritize the syndemics of HIV and viral hepatitis. Twenty-five percent of people living with HIV are also co-infected with Hepatitis C. The opioid crisis is driving new cases of viral hepatitis, especially Hepatitis C, where there has been a 350% increase in new cases over the last six years. Given that there is a highly effective cure for hepatitis C, it is possible for the US to eliminate the disease with the proper resources and network of health coverage and care. The AIDS Institute hopes there will be increased federal leadership and additional resources and funding geared toward viral hepatitis, such as testing, treatment for Hepatitis C, and a more robust surveillance system. We were pleased that the President’s budget included $58 million for the CDC to address opioid related infectious diseases and hope that the administration continues to consider infectious disease prevention and treatment in their ongoing fight against the opioid epidemic.

Thank you for allowing us to provide public comments. We wish you the best of luck as new members of PACHA, and offer our ongoing support to help you move the needle forward to ensure access to care and to end the epidemics.

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