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CDC REPORTS NEARLY 2.4 MILLION LIVING WITH HEPATITIS C IN U.S.

Federal Government Leadership & Resources Needed for Elimination

Washington, DC – Today, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released new data indicating nearly 2.4 million adults, or 1 percent of the adult population, are living with hepatitis C in the U.S. Hepatitis C is a curable viral infection that if left untreated can cause scarring of the liver, liver cancer, and death.

“Today’s report demonstrates that federal and state governments need to do more to ensure individuals living with hepatitis C are able to access the highly effective curative drugs,” said Carl Schmid, deputy executive director of The AIDS Institute. “We have a cure, which provides the ability to eliminate hepatitis C as a public health threat, but now we need the leadership and resources to make it a reality.”

Hepatitis C curative drugs have existed since late 2013. However, many state Medicaid programs and private payers restrict access to them, requiring individuals to become sicker and advance to a later stage of the disease, abstain from substance use, or see a certain type of specialist before being allowed to start treatment.

Earlier this year, Dr. Robert Redfield, the director of the CDC, commented, “We must never underestimate the possible. Hepatitis B and hepatitis C will be eliminated and relinquished into the history books of medicine. And I would state that now is the time to begin that task.”

We now need the federal government’s commitment to ensure elimination becomes a reality and accelerate broad hepatitis testing, surveillance, and linkage to care and treatment efforts nationwide. Most immediately, we need a commitment to fund those efforts. Currently, more than half the people living with hepatitis C in the U.S. are unaware of their infection. Until more people are tested, informed of their disease
status, and linked to curative treatment, the nation will be fighting a losing effort to eliminate the disease.

The number of new hepatitis C cases continues to increase each year, further impeding the nation’s ability to eliminate the disease. CDC surveillance data released earlier this year shows that in 2016, there were an estimated 41,200 new cases of hepatitis C. Injection drug use, mainly associated with the opioid epidemic, is a driving factor in these increases, with many of the new cases occurring among young, white persons who live in non-urban areas. Since 2010, new cases of hepatitis C have increased by 350%.

"Despite the large prevalence of hepatitis C in the U.S., and the dramatic increases in new cases, Congress and the Administration have yet to commit the necessary resources that states and community organizations need to combat hepatitis C and the infectious disease consequences of the opioid crisis," said Frank Hood, senior policy associate at The AIDS Institute.

The CDC's viral hepatitis activities are currently funded at only $39 million. This is to address hepatitis A, B, and C, nationwide. While much more is needed, the hepatitis community has been advocating for at least $134 million so the CDC and its grantees can adequately fund viral hepatitis education, prevention, testing, and surveillance activities across the country.

We are also advocating for $40 million in funding to implement the recently passed “Eliminating Opioid Related Infectious Diseases Act of 2018”, which would assist state and local governments and others to enhance surveillance systems to track opioid use-related infectious diseases, increase HIV and hepatitis testing and prevention, and improve linkage to HIV and hepatitis treatment and substance use disorder treatment.

The AIDS Institute urges the Administration and Congress to commit the necessary resources to accelerate hepatitis C elimination efforts and fully fund efforts to combat the infectious disease consequences of the opioid crisis.

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

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