

Statement of Senator Edward M. Kennedy
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Global Aids Hearing
“Capacity to Care: In a World Living with AIDS”
Thursday, April 11, 2002

Today’s hearing is about the greatest global public health threat of our times – the spread of HIV/AIDS.

AIDS is the fourth leading cause of death in the world. This terrible disease destroys lives, denies hope to individuals and families, and threatens the well-being of entire countries.

We in America know of the pain and loss that this disease cruelly inflicts. Millions of our fellow citizens – men, women, and children – are infected with HIV/AIDS. And far too many have lost their lives.

While we still seek a cure to AIDS, we have learned to help those infected by the virus to lead long and productive lives through the miracle of prescription drugs.

But this disease knows no boundaries. It travels across borders to infect innocent people in every continent across the globe.

We have an obligation to continue the fight against this disease at home. But we should also share what we have learned to help those in other countries in this life-and-death battle. And we must do all we can to provide new resources to help those who cannot afford today's therapies.

This Committee and its members have a deep commitment to sharing the lessons learned in helping our people at home to help others meet great human needs abroad. As we sought to enforce child labor laws at home, we also worked to protect children abroad. As we developed new ways of promoting children's health and public health, we have shared these life-saving discoveries with other countries in need.

And once again, we are called upon to open the doors between nations to do all we can to halt the spread of AIDS, and to treat those infected by it.

Twelve years ago this month, the members of this Committee demonstrated their commitment to the care and treatment of Americans living with AIDS by passing the Ryan White Care Act. Since that time, community-based care has become more available, drug treatments have improved that nearly double the life expectancy of HIV positive individuals,

and public campaigns have increased awareness of the disease. Yet, advances such as these remain largely the privilege of wealthy nations.

AIDS inflicts a special toll on developing countries. Globally, 40 million people have HIV/AIDS, and the overwhelming majority live in poor countries. Sub-Saharan Africa is the most affected region, where nearly all of the world's AIDS orphans live. AIDS robs poor countries of the workers they need to develop their economies. They lose teachers needed to combat illiteracy and train their workers for modern challenges. In Africa, they have lost seven million farmers needed to meet the food needs of entire nations. AIDS plunges poor nations into even deeper, more desperate poverty.

The presence of HIV/AIDS poses a particularly serious concern for women and girls. Most new infections are among young adults and women. Females who are not infected feel the impact, too. Girls must often leave school to assume responsibilities for sick family members, robbing them of educational opportunities and denying local economies of valuable workers.

Governments can make the difference in battling this epidemic. Where governments in poor countries have been provided resources to fight the

spread of AIDS, infection rates have dropped 80 percent. But these countries cannot turn the corner on AIDS on their own. Their governments must be provided the guidance and resources to carry out anti-AIDS campaigns. They need financial help to afford expensive anti-retroviral drugs. And drug companies must do their part to make these drugs more affordable to the poor.

In addition, more public education is needed. A UNICEF survey found that most young people still have not heard of AIDS or do not understand how the disease is transmitted. By speaking out, our government can help to lift the stigma and taboo surrounding the disease and save lives.

These challenges are not insurmountable. The epidemic is in its early stages. In most regions of the world, the prevalence rate is still less than one percent of the population. But we cannot delay. It only took 10 years for the HIV/AIDS population to double in the Russian Federation. And in South Africa, the rate increased from 1 in 100 people to 1 in 4 in one decade.

Our Committee is developing legislation to support and strengthen global treatment and training initiatives.

Our legislation would provide new legal authority and funding to NIH, CDC, HRSA and the Department of Labor to join the global battle against AIDS.

It would promote community-based care models and better access to microbicide research and retroviral therapies.

Our legislation would fund research and treatment models to prevent the transmission of the disease from mothers to their infants.

And it would help countries to develop better training models that support service delivery at the grassroots level.

Today we will hear from witnesses who have devoted themselves to fighting this epidemic by ensuring that prevention, care, and treatment is not just accessible to some people in some countries, but all people in all countries.

We are honored to have you with us today.