



Pursuing Global Justice
Through Grassroots Change

**To Congress Re: PEPFAR
A Letter from the Field by the American Jewish World Service
Rabbinical Students' Task Force on PEPFAR**

January 14, 2008

Dear Member of Congress:

We, the Rabbinical Students' Task Force on PEPFAR of American Jewish World Service (AJWS) comprising Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Reform, and trans-denominational Jewish leaders from seven seminaries, are writing from the village of Gbi Atabu in the Volta region of Ghana where we have spent 10 days working with and learning from the vibrant community here about the challenges of their daily lives – their lack of access to education, the systemic poverty, and the public health crisis in their midst. And during this time, we have also learned the adverse effects US global AIDS policy is having on efforts to stem the spread of HIV, despite what may be the best intentions.

The President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR) represents a desperately needed commitment to solve one of the world's most urgent problems. As you know, in 2003, the U.S. government pledged \$15 billion to the relief of AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria in Africa. Since that time, the US Congress has generously appropriated nearly \$23 billion for this program. Yet the conditions attached to PEPFAR are self-defeating and result in a failure to save the lives of as many people as possible. For example, the abstinence-until-marriage earmark and the prostitution pledge (a restriction requiring organizations receiving U.S. funds to sign a pledge opposing prostitution and promising not to "promote the legalization or practice of prostitution"), have seriously diminished the effectiveness of the plan by denying funding purely on ideological grounds to organizations and programs seeking to prevent the greatest number of new infections possible.

As you proceed with the process to reauthorize PEPFAR, we urge you to strike the abstinence-until-marriage earmark and the prostitution pledge and ensure full support for comprehensive prevention policies.

AJWS is an international development and relief organization motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue social justice. Through grants to grassroots organizations, volunteer service, advocacy and education, AJWS fosters civil society, sustainable development, and human rights for all people. In 2007, AJWS provided more than \$13 million dollars in direct grants to grassroots organizations throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The Rabbinical Student's Task Force on PEPFAR is part of the Rabbinical Students' Delegation Program of AJWS, now in its 5th year. Through this program, 25

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rabbinical students travel abroad each year to live and work with communities in developing countries. There are now more than 125 alumni of this program, the majority now working as ordained Rabbis throughout the United States

During our encounters here in Ghana, we have come to understand the relationship between U.S. funding through PEPFAR and the reality on the ground. It has become apparent that abstinence-until-marriage education does not adequately address the many ways that HIV is spread and can be prevented. A local rural doctor informed us that he diagnoses two to three new cases of HIV infection per day and witnesses two to three deaths per week from AIDS. In addition, we visited a Liberian refugee camp in which sex work is the only income-generating activity for many women. Under PEPFAR's prostitution pledge, many of the organizations reaching these women cannot receive funding from the U.S. government unless they abandon strategies that work.

As Jews we are compelled to thoroughly teach, question, and understand multiple perspectives. The Torah teaches us to "take utmost care and scrupulously watch over ourselves" (Deuteronomy 4:9). Teaching only one method of prevention is ineffective at reducing the infection rate of HIV. Although Jewish tradition teaches the value of committed monogamous relationships, the concept of *pikuach nefesh*, saving a life, supersedes ethical concerns addressed by abstinence-until-marriage education.

From our experience in the field, we have learned that the only way for HIV prevention to be effective is for it to be self-sustaining and comprehensive; it must be geared toward saving lives in addition to treating those who are already infected. Locally formed NGOs that are supported by U.S. foreign assistance under PEPFAR have begun to address the issue, but they are limited in their ability to teach about HIV prevention due to the PEPFAR standards.

Jewish tradition teaches that blood is the life-force of all creatures. HIV and AIDS, which has reached epidemic proportions in Africa, takes an astounding number of individual lives and literally contaminates the vital life-force of African populations, their cultures and communities.

A teaching from the Torah instructs us not to stand idly by the blood of our neighbor, and that it is incumbent upon us to save life where life is in danger.

We strongly advocate striking the abstinence-until-marriage earmark and the prostitution pledge of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. We must not stand idly by the blood of our neighbor, and we urge you to support these efforts to save as many lives as possible now and in the future.

L'Shalom,

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