

December 3, 2008

Dear President-Elect Obama,

We are both heartened by your electoral victory and excited by the many opportunities for fresh thinking on the intersections between illicit drug use, punitive sentencing policies and the transmission of HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis. You showed strong leadership on the campaign trail by pledging to lift the federal funding ban on syringe exchange programs, end the excessive federal law enforcement raids aimed at medical marijuana patients, and eliminate the crack/powder cocaine sentencing disparity. We are concerned, however, about media reports that you may choose Rep. James Ramstad (R-MN/3rd) to be your director of national drug control policy or “drug czar”.

While we applaud Representative Ramstad for his courageous and steady support for expanding drug treatment access and improving addiction awareness, and honor his own personal and very public triumph over addiction, we have strong reservations about his candidacy for the drug czar position. In his twenty-eight years in the U.S. House, Representative Ramstad has consistently opposed policies that seek to reduce drug-related harm and create common ground on polarizing issues.

Representative Ramstad voted in 1998 in favor of making permanent the federal funding ban on syringe exchange, voted in 2000 to prohibit the District of Columbia from spending its own locally raised funds on syringe exchange programs and voted in 2007 against lifting the same DC ban, despite decades of research showing that syringe exchange programs reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS without increase drug use. Rep. Ramstad has also consistently opposed congressional efforts to stop the arrest of HIV/AIDS, cancer and other patients who use medical marijuana to ease their pain and suffering in states where it is legal.

Unlike you and Vice President-elect Biden, Rep. Ramstad has also failed to cosponsor any legislation eliminating the sentencing disparity between crack cocaine and powder cocaine, despite the fact that there were four different crack/powder reform bills before the U.S. House in the 110th Congress. A number of recent studies have found that long prison sentences are one factor driving disproportionate rates of HIV/AIDS infections in communities of color. A primary task of the next drug czar should be to deal with this and other issues related to overincarceration.

We urge you to nominate for drug czar someone with a public health background, who is committed to reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C and other infectious diseases, open to systematic drug policy reform, and able to show strong leadership on the issues you believe in. Thank you for your consideration and attention to our concerns, and congratulations again on your historic victory.

Sincerely,

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Advocates for Youth (Washington, DC)
AIDS Action Baltimore (Baltimore, MD)
AIDS Foundation of Chicago (Chicago, IL)
AIDS Taskforce of Greater Cleveland (Cleveland, OH)
AIDS Treatment Activists Coalition (Boston, MA)
Alabamians for Compassionate Care (Alexander City, AL)
Asian Pacific AIDS Intervention Team (Los Angeles, CA)
The Beacon House Association of San Pedro (San Pedro, CA)
Brothers and Sisters in Action (Rialto, CA)
CAEAR Coalition (Washington, DC)
California Communities United Institute
Chicago Recovery Alliance (Chicago, IL)
Citizens Alliance for VD Awareness (Mount Prospect, IL)
Citizens AIDS Project (Mount Prospect, IL)
Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition (Denver, CO)
Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP)(New York, NY)
Downtown Women's Center (Los Angeles, CA)
Drug Policy Alliance (New York, NY)
Drug Reform Coordination Network (Washington, DC)
East Bay AIDS Center (Oakland, CA)
Exponents (New York, NY)
Harm Reduction Coalition (New York, NY)
Health GAP (Global Access Project) (NY)
HIV Education and Prevention Project of Alameda County (Oakland, CA)
HIVictorious, Inc. (Madison, Wisconsin)
Housing Works (New York, NY)
Illinois Consortium on Drug Policy (Chicago, IL)
Institute for Metropolitan Affairs (Chicago, IL)
International Community of Women Living with HIV and AIDS (ICW) (United Kingdom)
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Latino Commission on AIDS (New York, NY)
National AIDS Fund (Washington, DC)
National Association of Social Workers (NASW) / Association of Women in Social
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National Black Police Association (Washington, DC)
National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable (NVHR) (Atlanta, GA)
New Age Services Corporation (Chicago, IL)
New England Policy Advocates (Boston, MA)
National Council of Jewish Women (Washington, DC)
New Mexico Women's Justice Project Inc
NYC AIDS Housing Network (New York, NY)
Partnership for Safety and Justice (Portland, OR)

Pediatric AIDS Chicago Prevention Initiative (Chicago, IL)
Philadelphia FIGHT (Philadelphia, PA)
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