

# Press Release

Aid Agencies and Irish Groups Responding to HIV Challenge Stigma and Discrimination

For release on World AIDS Day, December 1 2006

## **“Irish charities working with government to keep the promise on HIV and AIDS”--**

December 1, 2006 - Today, a unique partnership of people living with HIV, frontline health workers and NGOs marked World AIDS Day by presenting their plans to challenge HIV-related stigma and discrimination in a year-long education and awareness campaign.

The Stamp Out Stigma campaign aims to alert the Irish public to the many ways in which unfounded fears about HIV infection lead to countless instances where HIV-positive people are discriminated against and excluded.

The initiative follows a major speech by An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, at a special session of the UN General Assembly on HIV and AIDS in June, in which he called for steps to make our societies more open, caring, inclusive and non-judgemental as a step towards tackling the HIV pandemic.

The Stamp Out Stigma campaign is funded by the government and organised by the Multi-Stakeholder Forum, an umbrella grouping of domestic agencies and overseas aid organisations, people living with HIV and frontline health workers.

“In Ireland, and across the world, there continue to be high levels of fear and stigma associated with being HIV-positive. These fears, and the discrimination against people living with HIV, pose real problems. Ignorance of the causes and consequences of HIV infection stand in the way of efforts to effectively reduce it,” said Ann Nolan, Executive Director of the Dublin AIDS Alliance.

“In the context of the national debate surrounding disclosure and notification of HIV, it is crucial that we create an environment in which HIV+ people can disclose their status without fear of rejection, prejudice or discrimination.”

A range of actions will include a nationwide media awareness campaign to promote an improved understanding of HIV and AIDS, and interventions to alert employers, service providers, educational institutions, housing and primary health care providers to the fact that it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of HIV status.

Other activities will involve supporting employers and other organisations to develop HIV and AIDS policies with NGOs to challenge direct and indirect discrimination.

“We find that in recent years, many countries have relaxed their efforts to prevent the spread of AIDS, as they assume that people have heard the message of how to protect themselves from infection, said Hans Zomer, Director of Dóchas, the umbrella association of 38 aid agencies. “In reality, ignorance, fear and stigma continue to thrive and prevention messages are not reaching those most at risk. This applies both at home and in developing countries.”

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[1] Tied aid is given under the condition that part or all of it must be used to purchase goods from the country providing the aid, so that the money does not actually leave the donor country.

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## **Time for International Action to Meet Commitments**

In a separate statement ([http://www.dochas.ie/worldsaids\\_day06.htm](http://www.dochas.ie/worldsaids_day06.htm)), Dóchas has called on world leaders to set clear and measurable targets for their strategies to fight HIV and AIDS.

In 2001, world leaders agreed a Declaration of Commitment on HIV and AIDS, stating that they would take meaningful action to combat the disease. They repeated those commitments in 2005 and 2006, yet many countries have not shown how they will translate these statements into programmes of action.

And in many countries, the civil society organisations that governments will depend on if they want to halt the spread of HIV and AIDS have not been included in discussions on what needs to be done next.

Ireland is a good exception to these trends. The government has a clear approach in place and has now launched a national campaign against stigma and discrimination. Through its aid programme, it also contributes to a wide range of programmes fighting the spread of HIV and AIDS overseas.

“This World AIDS Day, we are calling on leaders of all countries to be accountable to the promises they have made,” said Breda Gahan, AIDS Advisor at Concern and Chairperson of the Dóchas Working Group on HIV and AIDS.

“In 2001, world leaders agreed to halt the spread of AIDS. We call on those leaders to invest in life-saving prevention programmes and to continue to support treatment of people infected. Combating stigma is very important in this context, as is making affordable drugs available to those that need them.”

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## **NOTES TO EDITORS:**

### **1) Statistics on the HIV epidemic**

- The number of people infected by HIV continues to rise globally. According to UNAIDS, an estimated 38.6 million adults and children were living with HIV at the end of 2005.
- The UN estimates that someone is infected with the HIV virus every eight seconds, which is equivalent to 11,000 infections per day and more than 4 million per year.
- Every day, 8,000 people die of AIDS-related disease, equivalent to half the population of Ireland on an annual basis or 2.9 million deaths per year. Most of these deaths, over 2 million, occur in Africa.
- In Ireland, figures released today by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) report that 169 new cases of HIV were diagnosed in Ireland between January and June 2006. This is higher than the numbers reported during the same period in 2005. The total number of HIV infections diagnosed in Ireland up to the end of June 2006 is 4,251.

While the analysis of data and interpretation of trends is difficult due to the fact that incomplete data was received in 38 out of the 169 cases reported, 78 (46%) cases were heterosexually acquired, while Men-who-have sex-with-men (MSM) accounted for 24% (40) and Injecting Drug Use (IDU) was the route of transmission identified in 17% of cases (28). Mother-to-child (MTC) transmission was identified in 2 cases,

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while the route of transmission was undetermined in 18 cases. The mean age at point of HIV diagnosis was 34 years and 105 were male and 64 were female. Of the 78 cases heterosexually acquired, 54 of the people diagnosed were born on sub-Saharan Africa and 13 were born in Ireland. This is consistent with the pattern of heterosexual transmission identified in Ireland in recent years.

Overall, in 56 cases identified in the first half of this year the people diagnosed were Irish born, while 58 were born in sub-Saharan Africa and the remainder were from Eastern, Western, and Central Europe, South and South East Asia.

Commenting on the recent report from the HPSC, Ann Nolan said: "While we have witnessed a decrease in the number of people testing HIV+ in Ireland from a peak of 399 cases reported in 2003, this downward trend is largely attributable to the decrease in the number of heterosexually acquired cases from a peak of 232 cases in 2002 to 159 in 2005.

"The drop in heterosexual transmission of HIV is perhaps attributable to decreased migration inwards from areas of the world where HIV is endemic, while we have witnessed small but significant increases of heterosexual transmission among Irish-born nationals. Today's report confirms that we cannot afford to become complacent about HIV when 169 people have tested HIV positive in the first six months of this year for a virus that is largely preventable."

- Sub-Saharan Africa remains the region most affected by the AIDS pandemic, but no country is unaffected and incidence rates are rising in a number of developed countries.
- Although expanded access to treatment is estimated to have averted 250,000 to 350,000 deaths between 2003 and 2005, globally, antiretroviral drugs still reach only one in five people who need them.
- 2006 marks 25 years since AIDS was first discovered, although evidence exists to suggest earlier cases. More than 25 million people have died of AIDS-related causes since 1981.

## **2) Making A Difference**

Together, the Irish aid agencies who are members of Dóchas spend about €9m annually on AIDS-related programmes in developing countries. The vast majority of these programmes take place in Sub-Sahara Africa and are implemented through local organisations and local governments. The Irish aid agencies are supported in their work by Irish Aid.

Through their programmes, the aid agencies help raise awareness of HIV and AIDS, combat the fear and stigma associated with HIV infection, and provide treatment and care for those who are already infected. Collectively, aid agencies have helped to avoid an estimated 250,000 to 350,000 AIDS-related deaths. Through their global campaigning activities, aid agencies have also helped bring affordable HIV treatments to millions of people.

## **3) Referring to HIV and AIDS**

The current preferred usage is to refer to HIV and HIV-related disease unless referring specifically to AIDS, according to UNAIDS, which is the joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS. If referring in general terms to both the virus and the syndrome, use of the term HIV and AIDS (or HIV & AIDS) is preferred to HIV/AIDS, as is commonly used.

This use of language more accurately refers to the different populations infected, affected and at risk, and the different implications for prevention, treatment and care. Language shapes belief and may influence behaviours, and considered use of appropriate language has the power to strengthen the response to HIV and AIDS.