

# Archbishop calls for Pelosi to support HIV/AIDS bill

SAN FRANCISCO - Federal lawmakers must maintain their bipartisan commitment in the global fight against HIV/AIDS, Archbishop George H. Niederauer of San Francisco said in an April 1 letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

The archbishop's letter came before the House voted to pass President George W. Bush's \$50 billion, five-year President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR. The program has provided \$19 billion since it was inaugurated in 2003. It must be reauthorized this year.

On April 2 the House approved the measure in a 308-116 vote. The Senate's version of the bill was passed out of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee in March and is waiting to be considered on the floor of the chamber.

"It is in the best interests of those served by PEPFAR life-saving programs to have a bill that can be supported by both parties as well as the current implementers of this very effective program," he wrote.

"While there are certainly improvements that the Catholic community would like to see, in the interests of preserving the bipartisan consensus that is reflected in the committee bill, we ask that you ensure a swift and clean consideration of the bill," the archbishop said.

Archbishop Niederauer was referring to the bill to reauthorize PEPFAR: the Tom Lantos and Henry J. Hyde U.S. Global Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria Reauthorization Act of 2008, known as H.R. 5501.

The bill directs the Bush administration to develop a five-year strategic plan for program monitoring, operations research, and impact evaluation research of U.S. HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria programs, including mother-to-child HIV transmission.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services supported the

bipartisan consensus on the bill that came out of House Foreign Relations Committee. The USCCB and CRS backed some key provisions of the legislation, namely funding for food aid, retention of morally appropriate programs 150,000 extra health care workers.

PEPFAR has saved millions of lives since 2003, according to CRS President Ken Hackett and Bishop Thomas G. Wenski of Orlando, Fla., chairman of the USCCB's Committee on International Justice and Peace. They sent a joint letter to House members March 7.

CRS alone has saved more than 100,000 lives through antiretroviral treatment and continues to provide care and support services for another 250,000 HIV-positive people, thanks to PEPFAR funding, according to the CRS president.

The Catholic leaders reiterated their support for an HIV prevention program that gives priority to behavioral change as critical to reducing the rate of HIV transmission, including abstinence, fidelity within marriage and monogamy.

In a March 3 statement Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, chairman of the USCCB Committee on Pro-Life Activities, joined Bishop Wenski in affirming key provisions in the bill.

"The new bill reflects a commitment to saving human lives as well as our solidarity with those suffering overseas," the cardinal said. "It is vital to preserve and expand proven life-saving programs - especially abstinence and fidelity education - while refusing to dilute and distort a successful AIDS relief program with family planning and 'reproductive health' activities."

"I join Bishop Wenski in urging Congress to build upon a consensus that maintains PEPFAR's compassionate, life-saving focus," Cardinal Rigali said.

Resolving partisan disagreements that emerged in the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the bill would require balanced funding for abstinence, fidelity and condom programs based on evidence in each country that receives aid, according to an analysis by [kaisernetwork.org](http://kaisernetwork.org), a health policy news source.

The program coordinator must report to Congress if a host country uses less than 50

percent of its allocation on behavioral change programs.

A 2006 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office noted recent studies that have raised concerns about the accuracy of educational materials used in abstinence-until-marriage education programs and about the effectiveness of these programs.

These studies have reported that some of the abstinence materials have had misleading information about contraceptive failure rates and sexually transmitted diseases.

In 2003, according to UNAIDS, 3 million people were newly infected with HIV and 2 million died, according to a congressional report on PEPFAR. Worldwide, an estimated 30.9 million people were living with HIV/AIDS. Sub-Saharan Africa, the most severely affected region of the world, accounted for more than 2.1 million of these new infections and 1.6 million AIDS deaths.

Every day in 2003, an estimated 8,200 people were newly infected with HIV worldwide.

The United States has been the leading international provider of global HIV/AIDS support for prevention, treatment and care. From 2003 through last Sept. 30, the U.S. had supported retroviral treatment for nearly 1.5 million people and supported care for more than 6.6 million.

By 2007, HIV/AIDS prevalence rates were leveling off and annual deaths stabilized, according to the report.

While PEPFAR has reached a large number of people, the report said, the number of those receiving prevention and treatment and care services needs to be increased.