

Statement of Anthony S. Fauci, M.D. Director, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases National Institutes of Health on National Latino AIDS Awareness Day

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October 15th is the 4th Annual National Latino AIDS Awareness Day, a day to focus on the impact of HIV/AIDS in the Latino population and recommit to working together to curb the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS in this and other minority communities in the United States.

It is gratifying to know that national, regional, and local HIV/AIDS community organizations, along with federal agencies, scientists, activists, religious and community leaders, and people living with HIV/AIDS are all working together to raise awareness and curb the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS around the world. Today, we specifically focus on the impact of HIV/AIDS on the Latino community, which has been disproportionately affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Latinos comprise approximately 14 percent of the United States population, yet from 1981 through 2004 they accounted for 19 percent of all AIDS cases reported to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. By the end of 2004, an estimated 93,000 Latinos with AIDS in the United States had died. AIDS is the third leading cause of death for Latinos ages 35 to 44 and the fourth leading cause of death among Latino women in the same age group. Yet despite these alarming statistics, a recent NIAID survey found that only 11 percent of Latinos cited HIV/AIDS as the most urgent current health problem.*

A number of cultural, socioeconomic and health-related factors contribute to the disproportionate burden of HIV/AIDS in the Latino community. In addition to the language barrier, Latinos face a unique set of challenges that can include poverty; immigration issues; a cultural stigma against acknowledging risky behaviors; poor understanding of HIV/AIDS; and lack of access to adequate and culturally relevant healthcare.

To overcome these obstacles, Latinos and people from all walks of life must be encouraged to learn more about HIV/AIDS and to get involved in the fight to end this scourge. There are no easy solutions, but we must not lose hope.

Collectively, we must do more to ensure that Latinos are educated about both prevention and treatment clinical trials so they can make HIV/AIDS research relevant to their community. We can and must do better in this regard, as Latinos are underrepresented among participants in AIDS clinical trials.

In particular, to ensure that an HIV vaccine works for everyone regardless of their race, ethnicity or gender, all populations must participate in the research process. Unfortunately, the NIAID survey mentioned above found that Latinos had the lowest level of interest in learning more about HIV vaccine research. To increase knowledge among Latinos and others, the NIAID HIV Vaccine Research Education Initiative, a new phase of the HIV Vaccine Communications Campaign, is partnering with nonprofit community-based organizations and the NIAID HIV Vaccine Trials Network to conduct HIV vaccine awareness and education activities in the diverse communities they serve see <http://www.bethegeneration.org/>.

It is our hope that as more Americans become better informed about HIV/AIDS, they will support HIV vaccine research, and many will volunteer for a trial. Twenty-two clinical trials of HIV vaccines are under way, and to date, approximately 23,000 people have volunteered in NIAID-supported HIV vaccine clinical studies. With another 12 promising vaccine candidates in the pipeline, however, the need for more volunteers, including Latinos, has never been greater. A safe and effective vaccine to prevent HIV infection is our best hope to end the global AIDS pandemic, and I urge Latinos to become involved in the research effort.

As we test new treatment and prevention strategies, we should be proud of the fact that we are making progress through collaboration and partnership with the Latino community. I applaud the hard work and support of the Latino community in fighting HIV/AIDS, and look forward to continuing to work together to address the HIV/AIDS crisis that affects us all.

Dr. Fauci is director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland.

NIAID is a component of the National Institutes of Health. NIAID supports basic and applied research to prevent, diagnose and treat infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, influenza, tuberculosis, malaria and illness from potential agents of bioterrorism. NIAID also supports research on basic immunology, transplantation and immune-related disorders, including autoimmune diseases, asthma and allergies. Media inquiries can be directed to the NIAID News and Public Information Branch at 301-402-1663, http://niaidnews@niaid.nih.gov.

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REFERENCE:

*MA Allen et al. JAIDS 40:617, 2005

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