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Governor Signs Historic Bill to Address HIV/AIDS within California's Black Community

*Bill provides support for provider networks and establishes an independent
nonprofit organization*

Los Angeles – On Thursday, September 29, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed historic legislation designed to address the disproportionate impact of HIV/AIDS on the health of African Americans in five designated regions: Los Angeles, the Inland Empire, Sacramento and the Central Valley, San Diego and the San Francisco Bay Area. Assembly Bill 1142 (AB 1142) – authored by Assembly Member Mervyn Dymally – will expand and coordinate the statewide prevention and services infrastructure to support provider networks and establish a single entity to coordinate epidemiological data and research, catalogue services, and provide information on funding sources for African American issues as they relate to HIV/AIDS and other associated health disparity concerns.

Though there is no funding attached to this legislation, language in the bill would require the Initiative to establish itself as an independent nonprofit organization by January 1, 2008. The Initiative will serve as a clearinghouse for organizations to access information on research, funding and technical assistance related to African American individuals and will be housed at the State Office of AIDS until it becomes an independent entity in 2008. The Initiative is not intended to be a direct service provider or compete with existing community-based organizations. Instead, its focus is on strengthening service capacity in each of the five regions to more effectively and comprehensively serve clients and improve health outcomes for African Americans living with HIV/AIDS.

“After three Summits, nearly one hundred regional meetings across the state, dozens of conference calls and countless e-mails, a policy has been born in our midst,” said MacArthur Flournoy, African American HIV/AIDS Specialist for the California Department of Health Services, Office of AIDS. “Now is the time to shepherd this policy into maturity such that it will not become just another piece of legislation, but a turning point in our State’s health care system. This legislation presents an opportunity to further strategize, organize and mobilize.”

Although, the HIV epidemic has greatly impacted other communities, the urgency to address the specific needs of African Americans is growing most rapidly. Among all racial/ethnic groups, African Americans are disproportionately the most severely impacted by HIV/AIDS and the least likely to access or receive quality care. The Initiative’s focus will nurture culturally

appropriate programs to ensure that high quality, relevant services are provided to individuals who are most at risk and least likely to receive them, in a way that enables them to feel empowered to change their lives. Illinois is the only other state with similar legislation. The framers of AB 1142 hope this will serve as a model for more states to adopt similar laws.

On the downside, AB 1142 prohibits the use of state general funds to implement the Initiative. This compromise appeared necessary to get the bill passed in this difficult political and economic time. "We look forward to collaborating with the State Office of AIDS to implement the Initiative using federal funds until the legislature sees fit to invest directly in stopping the epidemic in our communities," said Stephen David Simon, AIDS Coordinator for the City of Los Angeles. "This is a vital first step toward raising awareness, increasing testing and giving our community-based organizations the support they need," he added.

The California State Conference of the NAACP and the Statewide African American HIV/AIDS Advisory Board are the bill's sponsors. To view the entire bill visit www.healingbeginshere.org/news.

Supporters include: The Statewide HIV/AIDS Church Outreach Advisory Board, AIDS Healthcare Foundation, AIDS Project Los Angeles, American Nurses Association of California, Applied Research Center, Black Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles, California Association of Black Social Workers, California Black Health Network, California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, Church of Christ of Rancho Cucamonga, City of Los Angeles, Clean Needles Now, County of Riverside Community Health Agency, Equality California, JWCH Institute, Lambda Letters Project, Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante, Los Angeles County Commission on HIV Health Services, Minority AIDS Project, National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS, San Francisco AIDS Foundation, and United Christian Women's Seminar.