

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Administration's Anti-Condom Policies Challenged in Congressional Hearing

In a Congressional hearing today, the head of the US global AIDS program, Ambassador Randall Tobias, promised conservative members of the Committee that he would strictly enforce the requirement that global AIDS programs promote abstinence-until-marriage, while restricting condoms to what the Administration considers "risk groups." Tobias promised that, if necessary, he would take actions including the defunding of organizations that fail to comply.

"Once organizations are funded they have to comply with the program's policy guidance," Tobias said. "We are now engaging program auditors who will be evaluating the adherence to that guidance. Instances of deviation from the guidance will be reviewed and appropriate action will be taken. This can include termination of their [funding] awards"

Ambassador Tobias was challenged on the Administration's restrictive condom policies by several members of Congress, including Rep. Barbara Lee and Rep. Betty McCollum. In response to their questions, Tobias claimed that US purchase of condoms for use in AIDS programs overseas increased from 2003 to 2004.

However, an analysis by the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) has found that the number of US condoms distributed in 2004 to countries prioritized in the US program ("focus countries") is actually much less than in 2003. CHANGE found that four focus countries received no condoms in 2004, while in 2003 they had received condoms. Nine of the focus countries received fewer condoms in 2004 than in 2003.

"It's time the Administration told the truth about its policies," said Jodi Jacobson, Executive Director of the Center for Health and Gender Equity. "In fact, the US AIDS program is removing condoms and other interventions from prevention programs, and focusing on unproven and dangerous 'abstinence-until-marriage' strategies. "

Administration policy is to deny condoms to "youth," a category that PEPFAR defines as those ages 15 to 24. The vast majority of these "youth" are sexually active and/or married or both.

"Effective HIV prevention programs should be focusing on efforts to delay sexual debut as long as possible, but, these must also equip those who are currently sexually active with the skills and tools to protect themselves from infection right now," notes Jacobson.

"Today," said Jacobson, "women and girls represent more than half of those infected with HIV worldwide. Yet the Bush Administration is actively dismantling effective prevention programs in the very places where women and girls are most at risk."

"It's time we realize that marriage is not a protective factor against HIV," said Jacobson. "In fact, in many countries, given patterns of early marriage, the highest rates of new infections are among married, monogamous women, a fact that PEPFAR ignores."

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The Center for Health and Gender Equity is a U.S.-based international reproductive health and rights organization. We seek to make public health and human rights principles integral to all relevant U.S. international population and health policies and programs.