

Working Together for an AIDS-Free Generation

By U.S. Ambassador John Tefft

For almost a decade, the United States Government and the Government of Ukraine have partnered to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the country. As we commemorated World AIDS Day last week, the U.S. is proud to be the largest bilateral donor to the Government of Ukraine's National HIV/AIDS program and to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Globally, the U.S. continues to lead the fight against this disease through the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the single largest effort by any nation to combat one disease. We are working more closely than ever with Ukraine and scores of other countries to save lives. Today, we celebrate those lives saved and improved in Ukraine and recommit to the fight against AIDS.

PEPFAR, which began in 2003 as an emergency response to AIDS, is now focused on raising awareness and fostering prevention to make the dream of an AIDS-free generation a reality. The global community has made groundbreaking progress in saving lives through HIV prevention, treatment, and care services.

As U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said, "The goal of an AIDS-free generation may be ambitious, but it is possible with the knowledge and interventions we have right now. And that is something we've never been able to say without qualifications before. Imagine what the world will look like when we succeed."

U.S. investments through PEPFAR have delivered extraordinary results. Through its programs in more than 70 countries, PEPFAR has directly helped nearly 13 million people with care and support, including more than 4 million orphans and vulnerable children. PEPFAR has supported HIV counseling and testing for more than 40 million people, providing a critical entry point to prevention, treatment, and care. PEPFAR has provided antiretroviral treatment to prevent mother-to-child HIV transmission for more than 660,000 HIV-positive pregnant women, allowing approximately 200,000 infants to be born HIV-free.

In Ukraine, the U.S. supports efforts to reduce the transmission and impact of HIV/AIDS by raising awareness, expanding access to quality HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, care and support services for HIV/AIDS patients and those most at risk, and developing the capabilities of public and nongovernmental organizations' (NGOs) to plan, manage and evaluate HIV/AIDS programs. Our programs strengthen collaboration between local governmental departments, NGOs and communities in areas hardest hit by the epidemic. These efforts are having an effect; the U.S. prevention project produced an impressive reduction in the growth rate of HIV infection from 27.4 percent in 2004 to 1.2 percent in 2010 in the nine regions where these projects worked, including Donetsk Oblast. However, AIDS mortality in Ukraine continues to grow, so there is still a lot to be done.

We believe that HIV/AIDS can and will be conquered, but only if we work together and target all of our resources, human and financial. As with any disease, we must prevent its spread among those most likely to become infected and care for those who are infected.

Perhaps the largest impediments to prevailing against this pandemic are preconceived notions and stereotypes; there is no room for stigma and discrimination if we are to win the battle against HIV/AIDS.

HIV/AIDS can affect anyone and everyone, regardless of sex, age or income. We need to understand how to prevent infection and to practice safe behaviors to reduce the risk of getting infected with HIV.

Many modern scientific approaches have been piloted and proven successful in Ukraine. Particularly important is our growing knowledge about how to prevent and treat HIV/AIDS among those who are infected and those who are most at risk. Fortunately, we not only know what to do, but also have high-level commitment of both our governments to pool resources and act on this knowledge through the five-year USG-GOU HIV/AIDS Partnership Framework signed last year.

The U.S. Government works with the Government of Ukraine both to reduce the policy, legal, regulatory and fiscal barriers inhibiting access to quality HIV/AIDS-related services that meet international standards, and to increase the institutional capacity of civil society and public sector institutions to provide those services in a sustainable manner so as to control and prevent the further spread of HIV/AIDS.

To address injecting drug use, a primary driver of Ukraine's epidemic, the U.S. has contributed to increasing prevention services for HIV/AIDS patients and those most at risk. We are testing better ways to provide comprehensive care for HIV-infected injecting drug users that could be replicated throughout the country. Methadone-based treatment programs have been piloted in five regions and this targeted support will strengthen the effectiveness and efficiency of the medication-assisted therapy. Perhaps the most important recent lesson learned is the value of methadone-based treatment in helping injecting drug users to adhere successfully to anti-retroviral treatment and prevent the transmission of HIV.

Now is the time to build on our successful joint experience and increase the scope of the program in order to "achieve universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support" and reduce the number of those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

Having observed World AIDS Day, let us understand that working together, we must build on our successes to save even more lives and meet our shared responsibility in order to achieve the goal of an AIDS-free generation. The U.S. knows it cannot achieve this ambitious goal alone – it will require the shared contributions of all governments and donors.