

Today I recognize the 10th annual National Latino AIDS Awareness Day (NLAAD), which also marks the last day of National Hispanic Heritage Month. The goal of NLAAD is to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS within the Latino/Hispanic community through education, regular HIV screening, and treatment. Since 2003, the NLAAD planning committees, the Latino Commission on AIDS, and the Hispanic Federation have worked with organizations all across the country to raise awareness and promote culturally competent interventions. This year's theme, "Hispanics United to End AIDS," is a call to action for Latinos/Hispanics to come together as a community and do their part to stop HIV/AIDS.

HIV/AIDS continues to disproportionately affect the Latino/Hispanic community, which represents approximately 16 percent of the U.S. population but about 20 percent of new HIV infections. According to the U.S. Health Department's Office of Minority Health, Latino/Hispanic males are three times as likely to have AIDS as compared to white males, and Latino/Hispanic females are almost five times as likely to have AIDS as white females. Latinos/Hispanics are also more likely to be unaware of their HIV status and die from HIV/AIDS than their white counterparts. Furthermore, gay and bisexual men are most affected by HIV, accounting for over half of new infections among Latinos/Hispanics.

It is important to remember that the disparate impact of HIV/AIDS on Latinos/Hispanics is not directly related to race or ethnicity, but rather various factors such as a lower awareness of HIV status, poverty, access to care, stigma, migration, acculturation, and homophobia. Throughout my tenure in Congress, I have always been a staunch supporter of efforts to help all people living with HIV/AIDS and address the epidemic. As a member of the Congressional HIV/AIDS Caucus, I have sponsored and co-sponsored several bills and resolutions in the 112th Congress, including H.R. 1774, the Increasing Access to Voluntary Screening for HIV/AIDS and STIs Act. My legislation increases coverage for voluntary, routine HIV/AIDS and STI testing while recognizing that culturally competent interventions are critical to reaching Latinos/Hispanics who are at risk for HIV/AIDS.

National Latino AIDS Awareness Day is about more than slogans and pamphlets, it is an ongoing commitment to take the steps necessary to protect one's health and the health of their loved ones. And it begins with breaking the silence of stigma, getting tested, and knowing your status. I also encourage all my colleagues in Congress to take this opportunity to rededicate themselves to improving access to HIV/AIDS testing and care, as well as supporting prevention and treatment efforts that help reduce health disparities. The health of our nation as a whole depends on it.