Background Guide to Accompany:

*Dual Pandemics: Global Youth Perspective in Fighting HIV and COVID-19*

Credit: Michael Iskowitz, former Chief Counsel on Poverty, Disability and Family Policy for Senator Edward M. Kennedy and former USA Director of UNAIDS

**Senator Edward M. Kennedy’s Leadership in the Fight Against AIDS**

The fight against HIV and AIDS, in both America and around the world, was an issue very close to Senator Edward M. Kennedy’s heart.

When the Senator first became chairman of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee in 1987 (then the Labor and Human Resources Committee) more than 30,000 young Americans had already died of AIDS and more than a million were HIV infected. Fear was rampant, but compassion and action were in short supply. People living with AIDS were not only suffering in silence but were losing their homes, jobs, health insurance, and even families.

Amidst this sadness, and ever-growing body count, the LGBT community, allies, doctors, nurses, public health officials and elected leaders, of highly impacted cities and states rolled up their sleeves, cared for their own and begged the federal government for help and hope. Thankfully, the Senator was there to answer their call – which was, don’t mourn, organize (pray for the dead but fight like hell for the living). And he did.

Senator Kennedy knew well that, at times of great fear and challenge, Democrats and Republicans needed to push past partisan politics and division to join forces for the greater good of our nation. With the help of marches, rallies, and daily fierce “our lives depend on it” advocacy, Senator Kennedy and the United States Congress began to act. And at that time, two extraordinary Americans helped to put a human face on this fight.

Ryan White, a 15-year old boy from Kokomo, Indiana, got HIV from a blood transfusion. He was shortly thereafter thrown out of school and run out of his community. Ryan had wisdom well beyond his years and taught us all that it was time to love, not hate and to “fight AIDS, not people with AIDS.”

Elizabeth Glaser, a young mother from Hollywood who had already lost her beautiful daughter to AIDS, was determined to keep her son alive. Despite the fact that she too was sick, she was a mother on a mission. She took Washington, D.C. by storm, using every breath she had and every tool at her disposal to hold us all accountable in her crusade to save the children. The organization that now bears her name, the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, has reduced the rate of mother to child transmission by 95% in the United States and by 50% around the world.
With the help of his Ranking Republican, Orrin Hatch, Senator Kennedy set out to shape the United States response to AIDS here at home. Together, the “odd couple” as they were called, got to work and:

- Created the **Office of AIDS Research at the National Institutes of Health** to accelerate our biomedical research;
- Staffed the government with hundreds of new employees needed to help respond to the growing epidemic;
- Provided resources for education and prevention, including a mailing about AIDS to every household in America so that we could fight fear with facts;
- Put a system of HIV testing, counseling, and confidentiality in place across the country so that people could safely learn their status and seek help;
- Brought treatment and community-based care and support to young people, children, and families living with HIV across this country with the passage of the **Ryan White CARE Act** which still today pays for medicine and other supports for half a million Americans; and
- Created protections against discrimination for people living with HIV and all people with disabilities through the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**, so that people don’t fear learning or sharing their status.

Together, this action put in place a framework that began to respond to the burgeoning need in the United States. Passage for each of these measures was long and hard-fought. The fear of individual senators prevented much needed action for far too long and many often sought to blame and point fingers rather than solve problems.

In the end, each of these actions received more than 90 votes in the Senate and the signature of a Republican president – shining a bright light on the reality that when we dig deep and work together, we can do great good.

Some years later, it became increasingly clear to Senator Kennedy that while we were making progress on AIDS here at home, the pandemic was now raging across sub-Saharan Africa; pushing families, communities, and even economies to the brink. Conventional wisdom was that AIDS treatments were too complicated and too expensive to bring to poor countries.

Senator Kennedy didn’t buy it. He held a hearing to push against these excuses to see if, together, we could find a way forward. Many experts testified that where there was the will, there was the way. Elton John said: “What makes America strong is what it does for itself. What makes America great – is what it does for others.”

Unbeknownst to Senator Kennedy at the time, President George W. Bush was also having these conversations at the White House. Nine months later, in the next State of the Union, President Bush unveiled a vision for the largest global health program in United States history – The Presidential Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).
Senator Kennedy was proud to be one of the authors of that landmark legislation, along with the leaders of the Foreign Relations Committee, that began to turn the tide on AIDS around the world. When the bill passed, less than 50,000 people in poor countries were receiving lifesaving AIDS treatment. Today, more than 25 million people are still alive because they do. Leadership and bipartisanship made this happen.

We have made great strides in the fight against AIDS both here at home and around the world. New HIV infections are down by more than a third and AIDS deaths have been cut by more than half.

But we need to keep on forging ahead until this job is done. The one age group where HIV infections are not on the decline is amongst young people – teenagers and young adults.

We need new and better ways to reach young people and we need their help in identifying the best way to do that. Young advocates have a new saying – “nothing for us, without us” – meaning they want to be part of creating the way forward. We cannot pretend to know their needs or what might work for them without their input.