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Protecting the Equal Rights
of Nonreligious Americans

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The Honorable Ben Cardin
Chair
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
United States Senate
Washington DC 20510

Dear Senator Cardin,

We write to urge you to support a five year extension for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Since its inception in 2003, PEPFAR has provided lifesaving antiretroviral treatment for 20 million people, provided 7 million orphans, vulnerable children, and their caregivers with care and support, and saved over 25 million lives, mostly in Africa. It is one of the most successful programs in global health history.

PEPFAR has been reauthorized three times since it was signed into law by President George W. Bush. Unfortunately, as Congress works to reauthorize it again this year, the program has been dragged into an unfounded controversy involving abortion that threatens to reduce the reauthorization to one year. This could turn the future of this life-saving program into an annual partisan conflict. A report by the Heritage Foundation raised the question of whether the program is funding abortions in other nations without offering any evidence of this whatsoever. The argument seems to be that organizations receiving PEPFAR funds may also be providing reproductive health services, and that this money is fungible. That argument is entirely unsupported and is entirely inadequate to justify weakening the program.

As you know, PEPFAR funds are governed by the Helms Amendment, the Leahy Amendment, and the Siljander Amendment, each making it illegal to use these funds for abortion. The head of the program, Ambassador John Nkengasong, said "PEPFAR has never, will not ever, use that platform in supporting abortion." Speculation and inference cannot be used as a basis for handicapping this valuable program with a mere one-year authorization as passed by the House.

Furthermore, by inserting this debate about abortion into the reauthorization process, lawmakers would make this about their religious beliefs rather than foreign policy or public health. The faith-based organizations that provide services through PEPFAR have denounced the abortion funding theory and support a five-year reauthorization.

We do, however, strongly disagree with continued inclusion in PEPFAR of language that allows grantees to refuse to use effective approaches, offer necessary services, or even make referrals to needed services based on religious or moral objections. These so-called "conscience clauses" are

antithetical to the separation of religion and government, which needs to underlie every federally-funded program, and they can result in religious coercion for both grantees and beneficiaries.

Any organization accepting federal funds, whether faith-based or not, should be required to provide any necessary service without discrimination, especially considering that funding abortions is already categorically banned. Whereas other federally funded programs may allow for accommodations for religious organizations that offer services in accordance with the program, PEPFAR is unique in that refusal of organizations to offer core services based on their beliefs may not impact their eligibility. In other words, the beliefs of the grantee dictate the types of services offered, not the needs of the beneficiaries or what is best for public health.

Despite this significant shortcoming, we all agree that PEPFAR is a critical program that deserves the five-year reauthorization it has always enjoyed so that it does not become a political football every year. Religious views on abortion—objectively irrelevant to PEPFAR—should not slow the reauthorization process down or change the five-year reauthorization that the Senate has wisely agreed on.

Sincerely,



Steven Emmert
Executive Director

The Secular Coalition for America

American Atheists	American Ethical Union
American Humanist Association	Association of Secular Elected Officials
Atheist Alliance of America	Black Nonbelievers
Camp Quest	Center For Inquiry/Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science
Cultural & Secular Jewish Organization	Ex-Muslims of North America
Freedom From Religion Foundation	Freethought Society
Hispanic American Freethinkers	Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers
Recovering From Religion	Secular Student Alliance
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