

**Statement of Congressman Peter J. Visclosky
to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee
June 23, 2005**

“Hope for the Future: Developing an HIV/AIDS Vaccine”

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Biden, members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to come before you to highlight the need for a coordinated effort in developing an HIV vaccine. Mr. Chairman, your leadership on this issue throughout the years is laudable. It has been a pleasure to work with you in the past and it is an honor to work with you now on this initiative.

This is a time of great opportunity in the fight against HIV and the United States has a great chance to assume a leadership role in developing an HIV vaccine. I am proud to work with you by introducing the Lugar resolution in the House as H.Res. 286. This resolution is significant because it represents a bicameral, bipartisan effort to combat HIV. I am happy that Rep. Peter King, my fellow Notre Dame alumnus, has joined with me in introducing this important legislation, reaching across the aisle to do what is right. Working between parties, and between the chambers of Congress, we can make considerable progress towards an HIV vaccine.

Mr. Chairman, your initiative to coordinate research is important if we are ever going to get ahead of this disease. The magnitude of this crisis is unfathomable. According to the Joint United Nations Program on HIV, and as you have mentioned in your opening statement, 39.4 million people in the world are living with HIV today. Nearly 5 million people were infected with HIV last year alone. Roughly 600,000 of those cases afflicted children. In fact, 50 percent of the new HIV cases reported in 2003 were in young people between the ages of 15 to 24.

The worst hit area of the world, of course, is Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa has only 10 percent of the world's population, yet it has 60 percent of the world's HIV cases. Over 7 percent of the adult population is living with the disease, orphaning whole generations of children. HIV is ravishing the continent. But this is a disease that knows no boundaries—political or cultural. Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have experienced a nine-fold increase in the number of HIV cases over the past decade.

HIV is affecting every facet of life in the hardest hit areas of the world. In addition to the human toll of the AIDS pandemic, this disease threatens the political and economic stability of these countries. AIDS cases in key government officials have gone undisclosed for years in some countries. AIDS threatens to destabilize governments of African, Southeast Asian, and Eastern European nations and could have serious repercussions for global stability. The country of Zambia offers a good example—between 1984 and 2003, there were 102 special elections due to vacant public offices. Of this number, 29 elections were due to the death of the incumbent. Similar figures can be cited in numerous sub-Saharan African nations. Often times, these deaths or resignations are reported as due to “prolonged illness” instead of AIDS, masking the true extent of the problem.

While this epidemic is worse in other parts of the world than it is here at home, we cannot ignore the ravaging effect that HIV is having in our own country. 40,000 people have been infected with the virus each year for the past ten years in the United States. Today, AIDS is one of the top three causes of death for African American men and women. There are close to 1 million people living with HIV in the United States today. This is an epidemic that is affecting the security and public health of our nation, and Congress has an obligation to do something about it.

In order to fight this epidemic, we must have a coordinated global effort. The tools of the public health community must be expanded to include more prevention technologies, such as an HIV vaccine. Given the scientific complexity of developing an HIV vaccine, only a large-scale, coordinated effort can effectively accomplish this goal. Yet, in 2004, only 1 percent of spending on HIV-related programs world-wide went towards vaccine research. We cannot sacrifice current efforts to combat HIV and AIDS; instead, we need to expand the scope of the fight against it. The global community must come together and share research, resources, and technology if the goal of creating an HIV vaccine is to be achieved.

Without increased resources and coordination, the development of a vaccine remains unlikely. S.Res. 42 and H.Res. 286 are an important first step towards the coordination of efforts on vaccine research. Last year at the G-8 summit at Sea Island, the United States took the lead on this issue, and encouraged the G-8 member states to endorse the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise. This “virtual consortium” of scientists, researchers, and other stakeholders committed to developing an effective HIV vaccine will be critical to accelerating efforts to develop a vaccine. We must continue to build on the G-8’s efforts to develop a HIV vaccine through global cooperation and coordination. S. Res. 42 and H.Res. 286 will show the world that the United States is committed to the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise and that we are committed to the development of an HIV vaccine. Mr. King and I will continue to work hard in the House for the passage of H.Res. 286. Mr. Chairman and Mr. Biden, I know you will be similarly occupied in the Senate. I urge the Committee to support S.Res. 42.