



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Circe Gray Le Compte, Director of Communications
Telephone: (202) 234-5120 ext. 309 * E-mail: clecompte@nmac.org

NMAC Commemorates National Native HIV/AIDS Awareness Day

March 19, 2008 ~ Washington, DC ~ On March 20, 2008, the **National Minority AIDS Council** (NMAC) honors the second annual National Native (American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian) HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. Native organizations together selected the date and each year the first official day of spring will symbolize a new era of awareness, prevention and treatment around HIV/AIDS in Indian Country.

“NNHAAD is an opportunity for all of us – Native and non-Native – to increase our awareness of the impact of HIV/AIDS on American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, and on their respective communities,” says Paul Kawata, Executive Director of the National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC).

In addition to remembering those who have passed and acknowledging those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, everyone is called on to demand additional resources to combat the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic in Native communities. Although often overlooked, Native Americans are disproportionately impacted by HIV/AIDS relative to their populations. Like other minority communities, Native Americans experience the same demographic, economic, and health disparities, which leave them particularly susceptible to HIV/AIDS. While the remote isolated nature of many reservations protected the tribes for a time, more and more young Native Americans are venturing out into urban settings, and are exposed to the risk factors for HIV infection.

“When we think of the impact HIV/AIDS has on communities of color in the U.S., we must broaden our scope to include Native and Indigenous communities. Per capita, American Indians/Alaska Natives have the third highest rates of HIV/AIDS, behind African Americans and Hispanics,” says Ravinia Hayes-Cozier, NMAC's Director of Government Relations and Public Policy. “We must ramp up our efforts to combat stigma, provide culturally competent prevention strategies, better access to care. This is a real crisis, and it deserves our attention.”

Indigenous leaders fear that HIV/AIDS may be more entrenched than initially thought in Native communities. This includes Brenda Hunt, a member of the Lumbee Tribe of Lumberton, NC, Executive Director of Borderbelt AIDS Resource and a member of NMAC's Board: "The numbers on HIV/AIDS in the Native community are drastically underreported. There is just no dependable, accurate method of data collecting. Many Native Americans with HIV are classified as 'white' because the agencies that handle them only differentiate between white, black and Hispanic and these inaccurate numbers then go on to disqualify our communities from grant monies that we desperately need."

Each year the United States Conference on AIDS (USCA), partners with tribes in the local area to honor the importance and value of Native American, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian communities in the fight against HIV/AIDS. USCA was particularly honored in 2007 to hold the meeting in Palm Springs, California, on the land of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. A Grand Entry procession with Native and Indigenous Peoples dressed in traditional and/or cultural regalia/attire opened the conference. Tribal leaders were invited to speak at the Opening Plenary to alert participants to the rich traditions of Native peoples, and the need for increased HIV/AIDS awareness in Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities. A special event, “*Celebration of Life*,” also held at the 2007 USCA, gathered spiritual communities to celebrate life, honor individuals living with and affected by HIV/AIDS, and highlight spiritual diversity and the strength of healing.

NMAC intends to release a report later this year to bring greater attention to HIV/AIDS and indigenous populations in the United States. The agency has been holding a series of teleconferences with Native leaders in the field of HIV/AIDS from across the nation. For more information on this and other NMAC activities around HIV/AIDS and Native Americans, please contact the agency’s Government Relations and Public Policy Division at (202) 234-5120 or grpp@nmac.org.

###

The National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC) was founded in 1987 to develop leadership within communities of color to address challenges of HIV/AIDS. NMAC has responded to the needs of communities of color by developing programs enhancing the skills necessary to confront this health crisis, including a public policy education program; national and regional training conferences; treatment and research programs and trainings; numerous publications and a website: www.nmac.org. The agency also serves an association of AIDS service organizations, F/CBOs, hospitals, clinics, health departments and other groups assisting people and families living with and affected by the AIDS epidemic. NMAC's advocacy efforts are funded through private funders and donors only.