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2007 USCA Opening Plenary Calls for Heightened Awareness around the Impact of HIV/AIDS among Native Peoples

November 7 – Palm Springs, CA – The **2007 United States Conference on AIDS (USCA)** takes place this week, November 7-10, at the Palm Springs Convention Center, in Palm Springs, CA, located on the ancestral lands of the **Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians**. Unlike other AIDS conferences, USCA focuses on the organizations serving those communities heavily impacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States, most communities of color.

For many people who have worked in the field for a long time, the conference seems like a family reunion – where one comes to build on previous collaborations, as well as build new partnerships. How fitting then that this year’s meeting focused on the theme, **One Family, One Voice, One Spirit** and opened with the plenary session, **The State of HIV/AIDS in Native American Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian Communities**. The session began with a Grand Entry which highlighted the rich traditions of Native peoples and blessings by a tribal elder and Cahuilla Bird Singers. (Click here to view the **Grand Entry** of the morning’s plenary.)

Unity, family and spirituality play an integral role in many Indian peoples’ lives. A disease like HIV impacts not only those infected and their families; but their entire community. “Native people are stewards not only of their land and their traditions, but also each other. When one person has HIV, it is the responsibility of the entire tribe to ensure that he or she receives care,” says Ravinia Hayes-Cozier, Spokesperson and Director of Government Relations and Public Policy for the **National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC)**.

Native peoples currently account for approximately 1% of all new HIV cases reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention each year. The rate of incidence among Indian people relative to other ethnic minorities seems low; however, there are indications that rates reported are higher. Many of the co-morbidities of HIV are endemic to Indian Country, including tuberculosis and hepatitis. Also, as Brenda Hunt, an NMAC Board Member who oversees BART, Inc., in Lumberton, North Carolina, and is a member of the Lumbee Indian Tribe, explains, “Many health care workers make assumptions, rather than ask about, the ethnic background of Native people accessing health care off the reservation. A native person might test positive, but he/she often will be labeled as ‘Latino’ or ‘Other.’

“Without accurate statistics demonstrating the increase of HIV incidence among Native people and the need for HIV/AIDS programming geared to them, we cannot obtain funding. It is frustrating for those who provide services in our communities, and for those who need them.”

Executive Director Paul Kawata says, “Today’s plenary – which began with a most awe-inspiring grand entry – demonstrated that HIV/AIDS does not occur in a vacuum. For

prevention, care and treatment programs to be effective in communities of color, they must embrace the cultures of those impacted by HIV/AIDS. Because at the end of the day, the work we do is geared to helping people, and not just combating a disease.”

About USCA’s Sponsor – NMAC

The National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC), founded in 1987, develops leadership within communities of color to address challenges of HIV/AIDS through a variety of programs and services, including public policy education; national conferences; regional trainings; treatment and research programs; electronic and printed publications; and a website: www.nmac.org. The agency also serves as an association of faith- and community-based organizations (CBOs) and AIDS service organizations nationwide that provide HIV/AIDS services in communities of color. NMAC's advocacy efforts are funded through private funders and donors only.

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