Written by State Rep. Jeff Hayden (61B)
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The growing global economic crisis has exacerbated the HIV/AIDS epidemic across the globe, in Minnesota and in our communities. That's why in seeking solutions to our economic crisis, we must also focus on ways to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS. In the State Legislature, there are several ways we can help win this fight in Minnesota.

Last year, we learned that an estimated 56,000 Americans become infected with the HIV virus every year. This number is alarming because it represents a 40% higher figure that had previously been estimated. More troubling is the fact that people of color, African Americans in particular, continue to make up a disproportionate share of those who become infected. Though we only represent 30% of the U.S. population, people of color represent 65% of new AIDS diagnoses and over 60% of new HIV infections. In Minnesota, a new case of HIV infection is reported every day and that doesn't count the estimated 2,500 Minnesotans believed to be unknowingly living with HIV. 40% of all new infections come from people living in Minneapolis.

Many of the reasons why African Americans are disproportionally affected by HIV and AIDS stem from a lack of quality health care. That's why we must continue working to reform our broken health care system. African Americans are nine times more likely to die than Caucasians from HIV/AIDS because they often lack adequate health care and are diagnosed much later. This inequity is simply unacceptable. Access to quality health care should not be a privilege, it should be a right. I am co-author to the Minnesota Health Plan, which would provide affordable, quality health care to every Minnesotan. Due to the severe budget deficit, this legislation will not be up for a vote this year. Nevertheless, we need to keep pressing for transformational health care reform.

Another leading factor to the spread of HIV/AIDS is the lack of information and educational materials readily available to Minnesotans. Every time someone is infected with HIV/AIDS they are contracting a preventable disease. We need to pursue a broad strategy in our communities that emphasizes education, prevention and awareness.

I have introduced HF 681 in the Minnesota House of Representatives, a bill that would establish a statewide HIV/AIDS Awareness Campaign to educate the public about HIV transmission and prevention. As part of my bill, the campaign would direct specific, community-based messages to culturally specific communities along with broadly directed messages to the Minnesota populations as a whole. In doing so, we can target specific message strategies in specific areas of the state to enhance the effectiveness of the campaign.

The campaign would include a toll-free resource line and website to provide valuable information to Minnesotans. For those who don't have health care insurance, this can be an important resource for information about HIV/AIDS prevention as well as alert people of serious signs that would signal the need to receive testing or medical care.

President Barack Obama has said that "combating AIDS demands combating the disparities in our society --if we leave people without hope or help, we will not turn the corner against this epidemic." Here in Minnesota I am hopeful that together we can continue the fight against the HIV/AIDS in a strategic, common sense way that improves our communities and saves lives.

In working to address the important legislative issues this session, I'd ask my constituents in District 61B to take the time to fill out my online legislative survey at http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/survey/61B.asp .

I also want to encourage everyone to mark Saturday, April 25th, 10:00 a.m. – Noon on your calendar. I will be co-hosting a Gun Violence Prevention Town Hall meeting at the Sharon Sayles Belton Center, Minneapolis Urban League, 411 38th Avenue South and would appreciate your involvement.