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The National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS-(NBLCA announced today the launch of a "National Call to Action" against HIV/AIDS as part of NBLCA's annual Choose Life Awards Benefit Gala.

President Bill Clinton, founder of the William J. Clinton Foundation and 42nd President of the United States, will serve as National Chair of NBLCA's 2009 benefit gala, June 3 at The Lighthouse at Chelsea Piers on Manhattan's West Side. The event will also bring together leaders from clergy, government, healthcare and other fields to help raise funds and awareness for NBLCA's ongoing battle to stem the devastating impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic within African American communities nationwide.

C. Virginia Fields, NBLCA's President and CEO, said she was thrilled by the support of President Clinton and so many other prominent leaders for the gala.

"HIV/AIDS is a worsening public health crisis among African Americans and other peoples of color," Fields said. "Although the federal government is giving this epidemic more attention than it has received in years, it is critical that this event be more successful than ever.

"We are issuing a "National Call to Action" in response to the alarming data that has come out about HIV/AIDS in the United States," Fields added.

Fields noted a series of recent studies showing that HIV/AIDS is growing faster than expected, and that the growth is much higher among African Americans:

• Black Americans are seven times more likely than white Americans to become newly infected with HIV, according to a report in August from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

• AIDS remains the leading cause of death among Black women between 25-34 years and the second leading cause of death in Black men between 35-44 years, the CDC reported.

• Blacks are one in eight Americans, but approximately half the people living with HIV in the United States.

• More people are living with HIV in Black America than seven of 15 countries targeted for assistance under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) initiated by President. George W. Bush.

In some urban areas and the Deep South, HIV infection rates among Blacks approach those of sub-Saharan Africa. For example, HIV prevalence among middle-aged Black men in Manhattan is almost as high as prevalence in South Africa, home to the world's largest population of people living with HIV.

• In March, the Washington, D.C., government reported that about 3 percent of its residents were living with HIV or AIDS, a rate well above an epidemic level.

More than 1 million people are living with HIV or AIDS and do not know it, the CDC estimates.

NBLCA's top priority is passage of H.R. 1964, the National Black Clergy for the Elimination of HIV/AIDS Act of 2009. That bill, introduced by US Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY), lays out a comprehensive plan for the federal government to lead the way in marshaling resources to support increased HIV testing, prevention, treatment and care for African Americans.

At the Choose Life Awards Benefit Gala, participants will also honor those who have contributed to the fight against HIV/AIDS, including A. Cornelius Baker, Senior Advisor to the National Black Gay Men's Advocacy Coalition; John A. Catsimatidis, Chairman and CEO, Red Apple Group/Grist; The Hon. Barbara Lee, Chair, Congressional Black Caucus; Andre Leon Tally, editor-at-large, *Vogue Magazine*; and HSBC Bank USA.

NBLCA was founded in 1987 to educate, organize and empower Black leaders - including clergy, elected officials, medical practitioners, business professionals, social policy experts and the media - to meet the challenge of fighting HIV/AIDS in their communities. For more information, visit www.nblca.org.