

Speech

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Opening Ceremony 2007 CRN+ Annual General Meeting

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Address By

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Good evening

Honourable Minister of Health, Sports and Youth Affairs, the Honourable John Maginley

Ms Suzette Moses-Burton, Chairperson of the Caribbean Regional Network of People Living with HIV,

Ms Yolanda Simon, CEO of the Caribbean Regional Network of People Living with HIV and

Dr Karen Sealey, Director of UNAIDS Caribbean Regional Support Team

Distinguished guests, friends in the global response against HIV, it is an honour to be at this opening ceremony.

It is my first ever visit to the wonderful country of Antigua, and it is a great privilege and honour to be here.

Honourable Minister, I would like to thank you for your leadership on AIDS in Antigua where you have achieved close to Universal Access in terms of Mother to child transmission and the availability of ARVs for those in need.

We thank you also for your leadership at the regional level where you were the Former Chair of PANCAP, and most recently the co-chair of the VII PANCAP AGM.

We look forward to seeing you next year in 2008 at the UN high level meeting on AIDS.

Let me also pay special tribute to Yolanda.

You have been recognised globally in the past many years as a visionary renowned for your bold statements and courageous actions.

A visionary who has been afraid of no one and spoken truth to power.

Your network CRN+ has achieved so much over the past 11 years for people living with HIV in the Caribbean.

CRN+ is an important regional force: making AIDS a priority on national political agendas, but also most critically bringing people living with HIV to tables where national AIDS strategies are designed, monitored and implemented. You have also ensured that Caribbean voices are heard on the international stage. And you have stuck to your driving principle – that all AIDS responses must be grounded in human rights. Thank you also Yolanda for your support to the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS set up three years ago to draw attention to the devastating impact the epidemic is having on women and girls around the world.

Last but not least, let me recognise and acknowledge everyone in this room and the extraordinary contribution that you have all made in your own countries and in this partnership with CRN+.

The thrust of CRN+ to now focus on the consolidation of national networks is, we believe, essential in the context of moving towards Universal Access to treatment, care and support.

This focus on building national networks is commendable because it will create a safe and supportive environment for PLWHA to come forward, be active and participate. It will also mobilize the community of PLWHA to assist countries through their respective National AIDS Coordinating bodies to set and reach the ambitious targets for UA. The watchdog role of CSO in general and of PLWHA in particular is critical in holding countries and international partners accountable.

As we look ahead to next year's review of progress towards achieving Universal Access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support, which will be held at the General Assembly, let's take a quick glance at where we are today . It's a mixed picture, but there definitely is progress.

Today, more than 2.5 million people in low and middle income countries are taking anti-retroviral treatment – up from 100,000 in 2001. In the Caribbean, we are

witnessing upward of 34,600 people currently on ARV treatment and I am sure that much of this has been through your advocacy efforts, especially of the Treatment Advocates in the national health services.

With access to treatment, much of which is free to those in need, the number of deaths due to AIDS is declining. We therefore have a situation in the Caribbean where people are living with HIV, not dying because of limited access to treatment. However, despite fewer deaths (24,000 in 2005 and 19,000 in 2006), new infections are continuing with implications for the sustainability of treatment given the high cost of second and third line drugs. In 2006 alone, it was estimated that 27,000 became infected (UNAIDS 2006) in the Caribbean.

In this region, great strides have been made in PMTCT coverage. However, there are still disproportionate numbers of young women who are testing positive. We must therefore reinvigorate all aspects of the Prevention agenda.

In many parts of the world – including the Caribbean - this means investing new energy in tackling some of the tough issues that lie at the core of AIDS. These include the stigma that enshrouds people living with HIV and that stops many people who need it from requesting HIV testing and treatment. Other deep-rooted issues that must be addressed include – gender inequity, the most extreme manifestation of which is domestic violence; criminalization and injustices perpetuated against sex workers, taboos against men who have sex with men, and transgender, indigenous populations, and migrants.

Our collective failure to deal with these issues in the past means that we are now faced with what are often hidden and increasingly complicated, overlapping epidemics. This is why we are dealing with an increasingly feminized epidemic.

This brings me to the purpose of my visit here which is to support the mobilization of the Caribbean Coalition on Women, Girls and AIDS. This Coalition will bring together

prominent men and women in the region who will advocate for the visibility of issues surrounding women and girls, issues such as transactional sex which is often an economic necessity, and domestic violence, educating women on their sexual and reproductive rights, and addressing stigma and discrimination.

In my meeting yesterday with the Prime Minister of Antigua, he expressed his profound concerns that all the efforts around prevention and treatment services are compromised by the persistent stigma and discrimination, and sought our advice on what can be done to reduce it. In our response we suggested that it is important for leaders to engage directly and publicly with HIV positive persons, and that the upcoming WAD is an opportunity for the public to witness the Prime Minister and members of his cabinet being tested. This is something that I encourage all of you to promote in your respective countries.

The Secretary General of the United Nations met earlier this year with a group of positive staff from around the world. The dialogue transformed his understanding of the reality of people living with HIV, particularly the stigma and discrimination they faced including in our UN work environment. As a result of this meeting, he called for a meeting with his senior managers and demanded a stigma free work place and devoted a special meeting of the Policy Committee to AIDS. This shows that direct engagement with leaders can and does lead to policy change.

Like you, our HIV positive colleagues have come together to form a group called UN plus. They produce an annual calendar which gives a face to HIV in our workplace. They take on critical policy issues which affect them. The entire UN has agreed to a programme called UN Cares which will provide support for UN staff and their families to move towards universal access. We need to walk the talk in our own work place.

However, Stigma and discrimination indeed remains the biggest obstacle to Universal Access. I just came from Honduras where I met with a group of women living with HIV and a family living with HIV. It was particularly moving to meet an absolutely wonderful 12 year old HIV positive child and listen to the stigma and discrimination she had faced and how nervous she was about going into a new

school next year. She had started a newsletter in which she wrote the editorial. Her daily courage in living was an inspiration. We need to eradicate the phenomenon of stigma and discrimination which she so bravely navigates every day.

I have heard of the important work that CRN+ is doing to establish in-country monitoring mechanisms for People Living with HIV to seek redress for discrimination and to document complaints.

CRN+ members Andel Simon and Nicholas Granger made an important contribution to the piloting of the Stigma Index - a joint project between positive networks, UNAIDS and IPPF that will collect and document information about People Living with HIV experiences related to stigma, discrimination and their rights. I can only urge you to ensure that mechanisms such as Human Rights Desks are placed in institutions that have the authority to deal with any perpetrator.

So where do we go from here?

First, we must continue to demonstrate – and advocate – for leadership. The Pan Caribbean Partnership Against AIDS (PANCAP) has and continues to play a pivotal role in shaping political leadership.

Second, we must ensure more involvement of individual PLWHA generally, and including at PANCAP.. And we must ensure that this happens at national level as well. The AIDS response would have gotten nowhere without civil society – particularly people living with HIV. Your leadership, and contribution, is absolutely fundamental.

Third, we believe partnerships must be expanded with women's groups, traditional NGOS such as the Rotary Clubs, the Lion Clubs, the Kiwanis and faith based

organizations. These partnerships will help to build capacity and strengthen the efforts of your networks.

Fourth, we must reenergize prevention and deal with the difficult issues, paramount among which is stigma and discrimination.

I know your national networks and CRN+ have and will continue to mobilize around these and many other issues. We stand ready to support you in every way we can. I wish you a wonderful few days of work.

Thank you so very much for having me here.