

**TESTIMONY OF SIR ELTON JOHN
FOR THE PEPFAR AT 20 HEARING
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
APRIL 19, 2023**

Good morning, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch and Distinguished Members of the Committee. I am delighted to join with you today to wholeheartedly support your commitment to extending the lifesaving work of the landmark PEPFAR program.

I was humbled to have been a part of your recent bipartisan fact-finding mission to South Africa to experience the awe-inspiring impact this program is having on the ground.

I want to begin by thanking you for your continued focus on the global fight against AIDS. We are living in deeply troubled times with countless global challenges – all of which I know beckon your time and attention. Given that, I am boundlessly grateful for the bipartisan cooperation that has been the hallmark of PEPFAR for 2 decades now.

While this effort was initially conceived of by President Bush – it has been enthusiastically supported by 4 Presidents and 10 Congresses and consistently championed by the generosity of the American people. As I testified to this Senate 21 years ago this week – “what America does for itself has made it strong – but what America does for others has made it great.” Bravo my friends – there is no better symbol of American greatness than PEPFAR – and you should all be very proud of your extraordinary efforts.

Before PEPFAR – much of Africa was in free fall. Infant/child mortality was skyrocketing, life expectancy plummeting, and decades of development progress being rolled back. Families across the continent were walking miles to bring their loved ones to hospitals in wheelbarrows where they were piled up 3 to a gurney in hallways... because every inch of the hospital was already full. In some communities, half of the adults were HIV positive. In others, 80% of pregnant women were. A generation of young parents and workers were being wiped out, leaving grandparents and older siblings to raise millions of orphans. More than 30 million individuals were already HIV positive but less than 50,000 in poor countries had access to

lifesaving drugs. GDP was dropping and coffin making was the booming business of the day – including mountains of 24-inch coffins for babies. It was beyond bleak and the future projections even worse.

In those dark days, there was little my AIDS Foundation could do for the millions suffering in secret because of the stigma of AIDS. In South Africa, where more than a quarter of a million people were dying of AIDS each year, we provided basic care to nearly a million people in hopes that they could at least die with dignity. We gave them food, clean water, bedding, blankets, aspirin, ointments, a hand, a prayer, and a plan for their children once they were gone – but those were the only tools we had at our disposal at the time. I looked into the eyes of way too many dying people begging for help and hope that was just not available. For them – AIDS was a death sentence, every time.

And then came you – compassionate American leaders who decided that it was better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Who decided that whether a mother or child lived or died should not be left to a lottery of geography. And who decided that American generosity and genius could literally change, not just the course of the pandemic, but the course of history. And it has.

Thanks to PEPFAR, horror finally gave way to hope. ARV treatment became available and people - suddenly “living” with HIV - literally rose out of their hospital beds and went home to resume their lives and livelihoods.

In the 20 years since, PEPFAR has saved 25 million lives -- more than twice the number of people living in both New Jersey and Idaho. That’s a lot of lives. AIDS deaths have been cut by 60% and new HIV infections by more than half. Hundreds of thousands of doctors, nurses and community health workers have been trained. Lab and surveillance systems have been established, and community-based organizations and mobile clinics have been created to bring essential prevention, treatment, and support services closer to the people in need.

Part of PEPFAR's power was demonstrating the art of the possible. As Nelson Mandela often said: "They always say it's impossible until it's done." And that's true for PEPFAR. Many said we could never provide lifesaving treatment in Africa – it was too complicated and too expensive. But PEPFAR proved that was nonsense and now millions of people 20 million people in Africa, are being supported on treatment, 6 million in South Africa alone, and mostly paid for by their own government. As a result, life expectancy is up by 12 years in South Africa... 20 years in Zambia. And the PEPFAR platform has not only transformed HIV into a chronic disease for tens of millions – it has been leveraged to fight COVID and made countries far better prepared for whatever viral nightmare comes next. This is great news and a tribute to American leadership, persistence, and strategic investment.

But we are not done yet. According to UNAIDS, our progress is faltering as one person with AIDS dies and 3 new people become infected with HIV every minute. While AIDS deaths and new infections are falling for most age groups – they remain on the rise for young people ages 15-24, particularly young women and girls. And this is especially concerning in Africa where the average age is 18 and where AIDS remains the leading cause of death among teens. For young people who were not yet born during the horrors of AIDS – they need a wake-up call, accurate information, and the power to use it.

In South Africa, my AIDS Foundation has partnered with digital platforms to reach young people where they are – on their smartphones – with relatable information and services that resonate with them. Twenty thousand have joined the platform in its first month and they expect 100,000 in 3 months, just in South Africa. In Kenya, we are working with the first drone delivery company that enables young people with cell phones to order affordable medicine and supplies and receive them within an hour. These innovations not only engage and empower young people – they save both money and lives.

In conclusion, you should be rightfully proud of what you have created and the impact it has had and is still having. We have the tools we need to turn the tide and increasingly national leadership, capacity and ingenuity are taking what is good and making it better and more sustainable – but we need to keep our foot on the accelerator. By extending PEPFAR for another

5 years and fully funding it, together, we can continue the march toward ending AIDS for everyone everywhere and leave no one behind. Thank you.