

Testimony
Appropriations Committee
Teo Drake
20 February 2009

There is no one in this room who does not understand that these economic times call for sacrifice. What I am here to ask is that any cuts be **Just cuts** made in **full awareness** of the reality of life with HIV/AIDS and the consequences for those of us living with this virus.

My name is Teo. I have lived with HIV for over 13 years and with an AIDS diagnosis for the past 8 years. Almost all of my adult life has been lived in the shadow of this terrifying illness. As my friends were starting careers, starting families- their lives full of hopes and dreams- I was struggling to get a handle on how to survive. They bought houses, I searched for drug trials.

I don't testify before you easily. In fact I am terrified. Very rarely do I disclose my HIV status for fear of the stigma it still carries. Not all that long ago my own father who I know loves me dearly told me that the reason my parents haven't told my extended family about my illness is the fear that they wouldn't come to holiday dinners.

I don't ask for your pity, it's not necessary. What I want you to understand is the isolation that living with HIV carries even to this day. If you choose to impose devastating cuts to the HIV care system, there is no other ready support for people like me.

I am still alive today because of the services this funding provides. Every month for 12 years, Freddie Close, my case manager, came to my house. She helped me find the drug trials that eventually would lead to the medications I am on today. Six years ago, I had 33 t-cells and the virus was running wild in my system.

She helped me access funding for the medications that neither Medicare nor CADAP would cover. Most of those medications were very expensive antibiotics to fight infections. If you get some infection every 8 weeks over 13 years, the cheaper drugs are bound to be useless.

It was Freddie I called early in the morning this past October when it looked like the infection that nearly cost me my right leg had returned. I was terrified and she was a lifeline.

I plan to leave the numbers and statistics to the policy wonks in the room- far be it from me to take away their life's purpose. I do want you to have an understanding of how these numbers affect me. In 2007 and 2008, my drug costs were in the neighborhood of 20-25 thousand dollars. My med out of pocket costs were over \$2000 in 2007 and \$1200 in 2008. On average I see one doctor a month, & a therapist once a week. The co-pays can top \$100/mo. I can't even give you an estimate for my most recent hospitalization. In comparison, I receive \$1100/mo from Social Security. Without the gap coverage provided by this funding there would be life endangering choices I would have to make.

Many people testifying here will repeat the Governor's own language asserting that we must care for our most vulnerable. I stand before you as one of those most vulnerable- yet I am not **the most vulnerable**. I still have a roof over my head- although in these times even that is not a certainty. I have been blessed to remain sober for over 18 years. I have had the opportunity to heal many of the wounds that put me in the path of HIV in the first place.

Our most vulnerable are those who still feel unwanted and unwelcome at the table. Those who cannot see a light at the end of the tunnel of addiction, of shame and isolation, of grinding poverty. The funding we are asking to be reinstated provides for services that light the way.

I can tell you from personal experience- If a human being feels disposable, without any hope, it is nearly impossible to make choices that reflect any other reality. Providing for quality medical treatment, substance abuse and mental health treatment, and stable housing saves lives without a doubt. It also allows those receiving this help to begin to act from a place of dignity and self-care.

There was a time when I didn't care what happened to me. Now I wake up every day grateful when my feet hit the floor. I need your help if I am to have any shot at the future I have fought tooth and nail to see.

The Buddha wisely taught that our fear is great, but our connectedness is greater still.