



Advocates Youth Activists Lead Charge Against HIV Travel Ban

By, Brian Ackerman, Advocates for Youth International Policy Manager

Advocates for Youth remained busy fighting for the repeal of the travel ban on people living with HIV throughout October. Members of Advocates' International Youth Leadership Council lobbied their Senators to speak out against the ban through public statements and through sending a Dear Colleague letter (a letter from many Members of Congress) to President Bush and Mike Leavitt, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. Their efforts have been a critical force for young people living with HIV around the world who face discrimination from this policy.

To refresh your memory, the travel ban on people living with HIV and AIDS is a discriminatory policy maintained by the United States government that automatically denies entry into the United States to non-U.S. citizens otherwise eligible for entry on the basis of their HIV-positive status. Congress removed the statutory (legislative) travel ban through passage of the legislation that reauthorized the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, but the Department of Health and Human Services has yet to remove HIV from its list of "communicable diseases of public health significance," and so the policy remains in place for those seeking to enter the United States.

Since Congress has already removed the statutory ban, the ability to end the discriminatory policy now rests solely with the executive branch, in the hands of the President and the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). However, it is critical that Congress remain actively involved in pressuring HHS to move the process along, so Advocates' youth activists have taken to the Hill to do just that!

In total, members of the IYLC lobbied five Senate offices, including Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ), Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Daniel Inouye (D-HI), and John Kerry (D-MA) and Gordon Smith (R-OR) (Kerry and Smith are the two Senators who introduced the amendment to remove the travel ban via PEPFAR reauthorization). The International Youth Leadership Council (IYLC) has played a critical role in raising the profile of the discriminatory ban and calling for its elimination as soon as possible through education of these policy makers. Senate offices responded with interest, and said it is important to hear from young people in the fight against the ban.

Over the past month, activists sent 425 letters to the House of Representatives urging their Members of Congress to speak out against the travel ban and to send a Dear Colleague letter to the Department of Health and Human Services to pressure HHS to continue the process of removing the ban.