

# THE ROLE OF PEPFAR IN HIV PREVENTION: PROTECTING BLACK AND BROWN COMMUNITIES AMIDST FOREIGN AID CUTS

By: John Meade Jr., MPH, Senior Program Manager: Policy, AVAC



The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) has been instrumental in the creation of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), established in 2003 to combat HIV/AIDS globally. PEPFAR has since saved over 25 million lives and made the United States, and partner countries worldwide, safer, stronger, and more prosperous. However, recent cuts to foreign aid threaten to undermine this progress, disproportionately impacting Black and Brown communities in the U.S. and abroad.

PEPFAR has been critical to HIV prevention and treatment, particularly in populations most affected by the epidemic. By expanding access to antiretroviral drugs, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), and implementing educational outreach, PEPFAR has not only saved lives but also strengthened health systems in countries burdened by HIV/AIDS. By the end of September 2024, PEPFAR support was responsible for 83% of global PrEP uptake. By the time the foreign aid freeze was implemented in January, PrEP uptake had reached 8 million initiations since 2016—an achievement nearly a decade in the making and mostly achieved in the past four years thanks to PEPFAR's strategic leadership. In accelerating these efforts, PEPFAR has laid a strong foundation to accelerate PrEP uptake, particularly with the introduction of next-generation, long-acting PrEP entering the market.

Yet, despite its successes, PEPFAR has repeatedly been subjected to political interference that has stymied the full realization of its mission. Politicizing PEPFAR and HIV prevention has led to serious concerns and uncertainty about PEPFAR's future. PEPFAR has represented one of the most effective investments in global health ever—but it is not a forever investment; rather, a strategic investment over 20 years to build sustainable systems and reduce reliance on foreign aid over time. Advocacy groups like AVAC are calling for a robustly funded, evidence-based PEPFAR that continues to focus on HIV prevention, treatment, and human rights, while ensuring sustainability of the enormous impacts to date. A strategically focused PEPFAR is not just essential for defeating HIV/AIDS but also for ensuring health systems and structures are sustainable, resilient and responsive to emerging threats.

A cynical ideology that dismantles PEPFAR will squander one of the most effective global health investments ever made—one that has made all of us healthier and safer, no matter where we live. Health is a global issue that demands sustained commitment, particularly for historically disenfranchised populations. Cuts to foreign aid programs like PEPFAR will lead to reduced healthcare capacity and weakened communities and set back years of progress and hard-fought progress.

The fight against HIV is a fight for humanity, and it must continue. By ensuring that aid reaches the communities that need it most, we can safeguard the progress made in the battle against HIV and affirm the rights and dignity of Black and Brown lives, both at home and abroad. Now more than ever, we must raise our voices to protect these vital resources and advocate for an HIV response that prioritizes health equity and social justice.

