



**Statement by Honourable J. Mark Scotland, JP  
Minister responsible for Health, Environment, Youth,  
Sports & Culture**

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**World AIDS Day**

**Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> December, 2011**

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AIDS related deaths are at the lowest level since their 2005 peak and according to UNAIDS the number of new HIV infections is 30-50% lower now than it would have been in the absence of universal access to treatment for people living with HIV. Even so, it is no time to let our guard down. Instead, we should wholly commit to this year's World AIDS Day theme and join the push to "**Getting to Zero: Zero new HIV infections; Zero discrimination; and Zero AIDS related deaths**".

World AIDS Day is important in reminding people that HIV has not gone away and there is much to be done. It is an incurable disease and no longer a death sentence. While globally there is reason to celebrate, local statistics tells us that we still have a lot to do in the Cayman Islands. Since the first case was diagnosed in 1985, we have seen a steady rate of new infections and the age group 25 -29 years reporting the highest number of HIV cases.

Since 2006, 32 new cases were diagnosed – six this year alone. To date, there are 100 known HIV and AIDS cases in the Islands. Another worrying trend is people's reluctance to openly address HIV and AIDS, and an unwillingness to get tested. And with low testing rates, our HIV and AIDS caseload might be much higher, as is feared by local AIDS activists.

Clearly, as a country, we are **not** on track to getting to **Zero**.

One of the biggest obstacles in reversing negative trends is the high levels of stigma and discrimination that HIV and AIDS still attract. If people feel they will be labeled or socially ostracized, chances are they will not get tested or they will not seek the treatment they need. The fear of discrimination is a strong force. As the subject of many studies, it has been shown to dramatically reduce the efficiency of any AIDS response as it prevents people from accessing much needed HIV related preventative and curative care, support and information services.

Of course, the strongest ally in combating stigma and discrimination is knowledge. It is important to learn more about the reality of HIV and AIDS around the world – and I thank our local organization, the Cayman AIDS Foundation for tirelessly working on these campaigns. But in order to turn back the numbers, the movement requires more – it needs personal commitment from all of us.

This call to action goes out specifically to our young people. As the next generation, you have the capacity and influence to get to **Zero**. Moreover, it is important to face the fact that as a group, you are also very vulnerable to a disease that is still far too prevalent. Parents should also join the discussion: Educating young people about HIV and AIDS calls for candid discussions of sensitive subjects such as sex and drug use. The schools continue to play a fundamental role in providing HIV and AIDS education for our young people through peer education programmes offered through the Red Cross and other partners, and I wish to congratulate them on their efforts.

Our region is still carrying a heavy burden - the Caribbean is still the second most affected by HIV and AIDS in the world, after Sub-Saharan Africa. While it is important for governments to continue their support by allocating resources to fight this disease, I also believe in the power of individuals and individual actions.

As Minister, my Ministry has recently re-established the HIV and AIDS Multi-sectoral Committee to co-ordinate an effective and sustainable response with the involvement of public and private sector partnerships. It is my hope that this committee will review our current National AIDS policy and National Strategic Plan for HIV and AIDS, and make recommendations to ensure consistency with international agreements and the development objectives of a broader National Health Plan for the Cayman Islands.

As was noted in a recent AIDS study: “All over the world, the AIDS epidemic is having a profound impact, bringing out both the best and the worst in people. It triggers the best when individuals group together in solidarity to combat government, community and individual denial, and to offer support and care to people living with HIV and AIDS. It brings out the worst when individuals are stigmatized and ostracized by their loved ones, their family and their communities, and discriminated against individually as well as institutionally.”

This World AIDS Day, I encourage every person to set your sights on achieving the three **Zeros**; let us pledge to work together to realize this vision for all residents of the Cayman Islands. HIV is part of your health and your health is your responsibility.

Thank You.