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NASTAD Calls for Inclusion of People Impacted by HIV and Hepatitis in COVID-19 Vaccination Plans

WASHINGTON, DC – Following the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) emergency use approval for the first COVID-19 vaccine, the country is embarking on the largest nationwide public health initiative in its history. It is imperative to ensure that COVID-19 vaccination efforts reach individuals and communities who need it most, including those who are disproportionately impacted by HIV, hepatitis, and now COVID-19. Not only must this vaccination effort overcome logistical challenges because of its unprecedented scale, but it must also address the systemic racism, medical mistrust, and structural inequalities that are driving COVID-19 disparities. HIV and hepatitis disproportionately impact Black, Latinx, and indigenous communities, the same communities that are more likely to be diagnosed with, hospitalized by, and ultimately die from COVID-19.

“We are grieving 300,000 lives lost to COVID-19. Three hundred thousand people, with inherent dignity and value who have left behind families, friends, and neighbors who loved them. A vaccine presents an incredible opportunity to stem the tide of the COVID-19 pandemic, but only if federal, state, and local governments commit to addressing the systemic racism and inequality that are driving the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on communities of color” **noted NASTAD Executive Director, Stephen Lee.** “COVID-19 has shone a

spotlight on the many ways our healthcare system is profoundly broken, including for individuals living with and at risk for HIV and hepatitis. This unprecedented vaccination effort is an opportunity to acknowledge the historic harms borne by communities of color and begin to build back the trust needed to combat this pandemic.”

To be successful, vaccination plans at the state and local levels must include the community networks and trusted providers that are best able to reach communities disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This must include HIV and hepatitis health department programs, community-based organizations, and harm reduction service providers who have demonstrated an impact in reducing health inequities among communities of color. While public health education campaigns will be critical as the COVID-19 vaccine rolls out, federal, state, and local public health officials must also address provider bias to begin to repair a legacy of harm.

“We will not end the HIV, hepatitis, and COVID-19 syndemics without an unwavering commitment to addressing systemic racism. This commitment must be at the center of the nation’s vaccination efforts, reflected in funding, community engagement, and provider mobilization,” Lee concluded.

About NASTAD

Founded in 1992, NASTAD is a leading non-partisan non-profit association that represents public health officials who administer HIV and hepatitis programs in the U.S. Our singular mission is to end the intersecting epidemics of HIV, viral hepatitis, and related conditions. We do this work by strengthening governmental public health through advocacy, capacity building, and social justice.