



Comments by Abner Mason
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It is a great pleasure for me to be here this morning as AIDS Responsibility Project releases our HIV/AIDS in the Workplace: 2004 Corporate Survey Report for Mexico.

I want to first thank our partners who are here this morning for their help and support.

I want to thank USAID, which is represented by the Assistant Administrator for Latin America, Adolfo Franco, and his able colleagues here in Mexico, USAID Mission Director Ed Kadunc and Nancy Alvey.

I want to thank the POLICY Project, and their incredibly talented team here in Mexico.

I want to thank the American Chamber of Commerce of Mexico, represented here this morning by Olaf Carrera and Gary Deaton.

And finally I want to thank the AIDS Responsibility Project team from Washington and Mexico for all of their hard work to produce today's report.

HIV/AIDS is the greatest threat to human life in the history of the world. It poses such a great threat, that fighting it requires leadership and commitment from all sectors of society.

I am proud that with President Bush's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the US government has taken a leadership role in the global fight against HIV in some of the hardest hit areas of the world.

We are also proud to share the stage today with our friend Jorge Saavedra from CENSIDA, as he and the Mexican government have taken bold and important initiatives to fight HIV here in Mexico. It has been through the leadership from the Mexican government that today, every person with HIV in this country is guaranteed access to life-saving medical treatments. It is also important to thank Health Minister Julio Frenk for his leadership in combating HIV stigma.

But as Jorge knows, leadership from government is not enough if we are to make headway against HIV. We will also need leadership and commitment from the private sector, and that is why we are here this morning, joining with all our friends from the business community.

HIV is also a grave economic threat. It is an epidemic that not only takes a toll on human life, but also on human potential. The United Nations and the International Labor Organization have found that AIDS has held back economic growth in every region of the world.

We are here to praise leadership, and also to sound an alarm to the broader business community. It is a matter of economic necessity that companies join the effort to fight AIDS, even here in Mexico, where progress has been made against the epidemic. We cannot rest, otherwise the disease may catch us unaware. Taking steps now, with policies and practices in response to HIV, will safeguard Mexico's economic future.

All of us here on this stage today ask all of you from the business community to join us as partners here in Mexico in this effort. Let's join forces from today forward to find more ways to fight stigma and discrimination, to continue valuing talent in the workplace, and continue to make Mexico an even stronger economic force on the global stage while we fight to eradicate HIV for good.

We will continue to work with you, and with the whole business community, to help make that happen. ARP's Stigma Reduction Program is designed to help bring us together in a public-private partnership for a better future we will all share.

With this audience, I do not need to spend a lot of time trying to convince you that corporations play a significant role in the lives of their employees, or that how employers deal with HIV plays an important role in how the disease is perceived and dealt with by employees, their families, and the communities in which companies operate. Your willingness to participate in our survey, and your presence here this morning is proof you know you must be part of the solution.

Our survey had many interesting findings. The 20 companies that participated are among the largest employers in Mexico, and collectively, they employ almost 300,000 people here. They come from all sectors of the economy – services, hi-tech, manufacturing, retail, banking, accounting, consumer products and more... And some are part of the largest multinational corporations in the world.

The survey finds that many of these companies are leaders in the battle against HIV/AIDS discrimination in Mexico.

All of them stated that, as a matter of policy, none would fire a person with HIV from their jobs.

A majority of companies provide HIV/AIDS education to their employees.

An overwhelming majority reject the policy of medical screening for HIV, and we found that a growing number of U.S. companies based here in Mexico are adopting global AIDS policies, based on the policies they have at their parent companies in the United States.

As you'll see in the report, there are many examples of leadership.

Our friends at Banamex, for example, are part of one of the oldest companies in Mexico, and one of its most venerable institutions. And yet, Banamex has among the most modern and generous policies on HIV. There is no discrimination in hiring, no medical screening, full confidentiality and 100% coverage for some of the best medical care in Mexico for their HIV-positive employees.

Our friends at 3M, Xerox and Pepsico, like others, maintain a set of HIV policies here in Mexico that are in line with their policies worldwide.

Fedex Express has a company philosophy entitled “people – service – profit” where “people” come first. They also reject medical screening for HIV, provide health care coverage and confidentiality protection. To them, like many of the other companies surveyed, it is not just a matter of protecting human rights, it is also a way of valuing talent and competing for the best labor available in this great country.

We also found many parallels between medical screening for HIV in employment, and some policies in Mexico regarding screening out pregnant women. We know there have been public campaigns in support of the rights of pregnant women to keep their jobs. We have found in many of the companies we met with that there is solidarity of spirit between the issue of pregnant women being fired, and workers with HIV losing their jobs. Many of the human resources departments represented here today know that both practices can result in unnecessary loss of good talent, productivity, training investment and ultimately, loss of profit.

And while we had exceptional leaders among the 20 companies that participated, it is important to note that all of them joined this effort voluntarily, and our message to the whole business community is that we offer an outstretched hand again today to every company in Mexico, regardless of your current policies.

Let’s go a step further, and join together in an alliance to end HIV stigma, to eliminate the barriers to testing, treatment and improved health in the families of all our valuable employees in Mexico.

It’s good for people. It’s good for business. Therefore, it’s good for Mexico.

This survey is just a beginning. By working together with all of you here, we hope to give our strong support to all those in Mexico who started this effort, especially CENSIDA and the Ministry of Health, and all the non-governmental organizations such as AVE who are so dedicated to this cause.

As the report also mentions, there are many challenges ahead. Anti-stigma policies are far from universal here in Mexico. And whatever the legal requirements are today, we shouldn’t wait for the law to step in. We can start this afternoon to look at ways in which each of us can adopt voluntary

policies and practices which will improve our businesses and reduce stigma in the workplace.

And we can form this alliance through the Stigma Reduction Program and all the efforts in our growing coalition.

Thank you again for the opportunity to work with you.