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**Asian Health Coalition and The Banyan Tree Project Announce May 19, 2005
"First Annual Asian & Pacific Islander HIV/AIDS Awareness Day"**

Local Reception to Launch National Initiative to Foster Acceptance & Compassion
in Asian & Pacific Islander Communities

(Chicago IL) – April 14, 2005 -- The Asian Health Coalition of Illinois, on behalf of The Banyan Tree Project, has claimed May 19, 2005 as the first-ever, national **Asian and Pacific Islander HIV/AIDS Awareness Day**. To commemorate this historic event, which is officially recognized by US Department of Health & Human Services, the Asian Health Coalition of Illinois (AHCI) will hold a special May 19th reception at the Jane Addams Hull House Center, 1136 W. Wilson Avenue, Chicago from 6-8 PM. The free reception is open to the public and the media, and will feature a 7:00PM presentation. Similar launch events will be held in five other cities around the United States, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington DC, Honolulu and Boston. The month of May is also Asian & Pacific American Heritage Month, and May 19th serves to underscore the importance of HIV health issues.

The Banyan Tree Project is a groundbreaking national campaign to foster acceptance and compassion towards those at risk or infected with HIV/AIDS in Asian and Pacific Islander (A&PI) communities. By informing, teaching, and setting a positive example, the Project's members hope to stop the cycle of discrimination and silence, and eliminate barriers that delay or prevent access to HIV prevention and care services.

According to Asian Health Coalition of Illinois (AHCI) Project Coordinator Karl Kimpo, the culture of silence and saving face that shrouds topics such as sexuality and safer sex in A&PI populations makes it particularly difficult to overcome the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS.

Kimpo states, "Imagine being a gay or lesbian in this society and all terms used to identify you in your parents' language are derogatory or they don't even exist. Subtle cultural messages like this inform one's self-worth from childhood and can have lasting negative effects on decisions made around safer sex and behavior change."

The fact that the A&PI population is one of the fastest-growing in the United States makes the need for public awareness even more urgent. The first annual **Asian and Pacific Islander HIV/AIDS Awareness Day** is a crucial step in focusing attention on an emerging concern affecting A&PIs in this country.

“A&PIs are often seen as the ‘model minority’ in terms of health, education, and economic status, yet they remain underserved in healthcare,” continued Kimpo. “There’s also been a general perception that these communities are immune from HIV, but now considerable evidence suggests that notion as fiction rather than fact.”

While the number of reported AIDS cases among A&PIs remains relatively small as compared to other populations, underreporting and misclassification hides the true impact of the epidemic on this group. HIV data from years 2000 to 2003 indicates a 54% increase in AIDS diagnosis among A&PIs in the US. In addition, a strongly-entrenched cycle of cultural shame and stigma surrounding issues of sexuality, disease and acceptable behavior continues to thwart access to HIV prevention and care.

“The visual symbol for the Project is the banyan tree, which is a common image in many A&PI cultures,” said Kimpo. “Its branches continually shoot out new roots into the ground, thus, inspiring the Project’s tagline: “Rooted in Acceptance.” It is also the tree under which the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment. It is in this way we hope that A&PI communities across the U.S. gain enlightenment and understanding around HIV/AIDS.” (High-res images of the BTP and AHCI logos are available upon request.)

While Banyan Tree Project organizers recognize that minimizing HIV stigma will be a challenge, they are also optimistic that this is a first step in the right direction. Kimpo states, “Our hope is to change behavior and attitudes within the community, which means emphasizing compassion and understanding. But if you want to solve a problem you have to acknowledge it first.”

For more information on the May 19th reception or to RSVP by May 9th, contact Karl Kimpo at (773)878-0761 or karl@asianhealth.org.

About AHCI: Asian Health Coalition of Illinois (AHCI), located in Chicago, works to improve the health and well being of Asian & Pacific Islanders (A&PIs) in Illinois through advocacy, technical assistance, public education and community-based research. Since 2000, AHCI has provided Capacity Building Assistance (CBA) to health departments, HIV Community Planning Groups (CPGs), and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) that serve A&PIs. AHCI has convened the Chicago A&PI AIDS Network and the Midwest A&PI AIDS Network over the last four years, bringing together service providers, people living with HIV and key community stakeholders to address HIV/AIDS needs of A&PI AIDS communities in the region. For more information on AHCI and the Banyan Tree Project, go to www.asianhealth.org and www.banyantreeproject.org.

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