Remarks for Press Conference November 30, 2020 10:00AM

Good morning. I’m Jacqui Kilmer and I’m the CEO of Harlem United.

[As others have pointed out this morning,]We’ve made great progress toward reaching our goal of ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic in NYS, but we aren’t there yet. And the progress we have made, and any future progress, are now at risk because of actions the State is taking that will decimate the safety net system, impede our efforts to reduce health disparities for people of color and low income NYers and cause the communities we serve to become sicker.

HIV/AIDS safety net agencies, like all of the agencies here today, provide critical services to address social determinants of HIV health outcomes, such as housing, food, and transportation, as well as HIV clinical care, PrEP and PEP, access to medicines, and harm reduction services, all of which are essential to ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Beginning in April, at the start of the State’s fiscal year and not long after the full force of the COVID-19 pandemic had hit NY, HIV/AIDS safety net agencies along with hundreds of other community based organizations across NYS were facing significant delays in reimbursement from the State on contracts for services they had already provided. Payment delays are, unfortunately, not uncommon, but these delays were worse than normal and were compounded by COVID-19 which was already taxing the resources of safety net providers. The State subsequently announced it was implementing a 20% withhold on reimbursement payments. Hundreds of contracts and tens of millions of dollars are impacted by this withhold. The withhold is already having a devastating impact on the continued viability of safety net providers. And we have been told that this withhold may become a permanent funding cut.

Community based safety net organizations have been at the forefront of the fight to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and these same organizations are now at the forefront of caring for the most vulnerable communities during the pandemic. We do this not because we are well-funded to do it, but because we have a moral imperative to help those in need. In nearly every case, the contracts we enter into with the State to provide essential services are just barely sufficient to fully cover the cost of providing those services. And now we are being told to continue to provide services without being fully reimbursed for those services.

Withholding full payment for services already performed, continued delays in payment of the 80% that is supposed to be paid, delays in registration of contracts keeping agencies from even being able to voucher for payment, and continued uncertainty as to whether the 20% withhold will become a permanent cut—all of this is putting safety net agencies in an untenable position.

We are not blind to the State’s fiscal situation. But there are other options for the State to pursue that will not put at risk the health and safety of NY’s most vulnerable communities, increase health inequities, and reverse the hard-won progress we have made toward ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic in NY. The State cannot solve its fiscal problems on the backs of the safety net system and the communities that rely on it.

We’re calling on the Governor to make good on his contractual commitments to the safety net and on his commitment to fully implement all of the Blueprint recommendations to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic.