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On Eve of World Hepatitis Day, New Yorkers With Hepatitis C And Allies Block Traffic, Occupy Lobby of World Health Organization (WHO) Demanding Leadership to End the Epidemic

Protest is part of a global day of action in over a dozen countries calling on WHO's Director General Margaret Chan to fight for access to hepatitis C prevention, diagnostics and treatment

New York, NY – People with hepatitis C and allies protested outside of the World Health Organization's NYC office today to draw attention to the international health agency's failure to address the global hepatitis C epidemic. The activists, many of who are living with hepatitis C, blocked traffic on Second Avenue at 47th Street after occupying the lobby of WHO's office building. They also held hundreds of balloons that said "Hep C Time Bomb" and a banner outlining their demands.

"We have the tools to end the hepatitis C epidemic, but Dr. Chan can't summon the political will to take this epidemic seriously," said Leleve Pointer, a VOCAL-NY Users Union member from the Bronx. "With a range of diagnostic options, proven hepatitis C prevention strategies like methadone and syringe exchange, and medication in the pipeline that may cure 100% of people with hepatitis C, there is zero excuse for inaction from WHO."

WHO has called hepatitis C a "viral time bomb" yet has done little to address the epidemic. There are an estimated 150 million people with chronic hepatitis C infection worldwide, according to WHO, but most of them do not know their status and cannot access prevention or treatment services. About 350,000 people die from hepatitis C-related liver disease each year. VOCAL-NY, Treatment Action Group (TAG), NYHRE, CitiWide Harm Reduction, Washington Heights CORNER Project and thousands of others from 86 countries calling on WHO to show leadership on fighting the hepatitis C epidemic have launched a petition (www.hepcoalition.org) outlining their demands.

Demands for the global day of action targeting WHO include:

- Advocating for rights-based harm reduction;
- Establishing a prequalification process for alternative and bio similar pegylated interferon products;
- Monitoring the quality of, and increasing access to, HCV diagnostics;
- Prioritizing and expediting the addition of HCV direct-acting antivirals to the WHO Essential Medicines List, to create access to affordable, high-quality, safe, and effective HCV treatment;
- Providing technical support to countries to increase their capacity to deliver HCV care and treatment; and
- Creating clear guidance on HCV screening and testing that explicitly recommends screening for people living with HIV, in whom HCV progresses rapidly, and for people who inject drugs.

VOCAL-NY is a grassroots membership organization that works to build a healthy and just New York by fighting to end the war on drugs, the HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis epidemics, and mass incarceration.