

**Remarks by Assistant Senate Democratic Leader Richard J. Durbin
To WISHH – the World Initiative for Soy in Human Health
Thursday, February 17, 2005**

I want to thank my friend Steve Scates, of the Illinois Soybean Association, for those kind words. Steve and his wife Kappy and I have been friends for years. It's good to see them – and all of you. Thank you for inviting me to be part of this important conference.

There are three reasons I support the WISHH program. The first reason – the overwhelming reason – I support the WISHH program is because our nation has a moral responsibility to do all we can to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS in this world, and to ease the suffering of those who are already infected.

Colin Powell is a man who knows something about weapons. Last month, during a visit to Kenya, he called HIV/AIDS “the greatest weapon of mass destruction in the world today.” I think he is right.

Two months ago, I went back to South Africa. I visited a clinic in Capetown, the most beautiful city in the world. The clinic was in a section of Capetown called Khayelitsha, a poor area where people were just getting by.

Do you know what a freight container is? Well, they had taken a freight container and turned it into a clinic. It was just metal walls, no windows, and it was filled with people sitting on wooden benches. But something miraculous was happening in that clinic. For the first time, after years of debate, we decided we were going to provide antiretroviral drugs to poor people infected with HIV/AIDS. For a long time, we debated. We said, “Yes, it's a good idea, but it's too expensive,” or “they don't have the infrastructure to deliver the drugs,” or “they don't have clean water to wash the drugs down with.” But then, finally, we stopped debating and we did the right thing and provided the drugs. Inside that clinic, men, women and children waited patiently to take a blood test. In a perverse way, they were hoping that they would be sick enough so that they could get the life-saving drugs.

Outside the clinic, a group of children were playing in a playground. I use that word loosely. It was really a dirt field. The children were playing with sticks and stones and old rubber tires and having a ball. There must have been about 20 or 30 kids. I took about two steps in their direction. These children didn't know me at all. I was just a stranger with a white face, but they all came running toward me and surrounded me, then they started hugging me – all of them, in concentric circles. Then out of nowhere, they started singing spontaneously the African National Anthem. These were the children of the patients who were waiting inside that clinic. These were the children who would become orphaned if their parents couldn't obtain treatment.

I know what it means to lose a parent. My father died when I was 14. As hard my Dad's death was for our family, our suffering was eased because we lived in a society that had the ability and the compassion to create a safety net. My mom worked hard, my two older brothers helped out and I was lucky to have a lot of good teachers who put their arms around me. But those little children in that dirt field and their sick parents have no net to catch them.

There are 14 million AIDS orphans in the world today and nearly 40 million people living with AIDS. We can be proud that that 700,000 people in developing countries are the receiving antiretroviral treatments I saw at that clinic. But we must remember that is just a small fraction of the millions who need these lifesaving medications.

We also have to recognize that medications – alone – aren't enough. It's hard to keep down antiretroviral drugs when your stomach is empty. And it's hard for a body to absorb the drugs when it's starving.

A few years ago, I visited the largest hospital in South Africa, in Soweto Township. This was back before they had antiretroviral drugs. What did the doctors have to offer? Nutrition supplements. And you know what? People were doing pretty well.

This shouldn't be an either-or question: either we provide antiretroviral drugs or we provide food aid for people with AIDS. We ought to do *both*. And soy are soy-enhanced products can be good sources of nutrition for people with HIV/AIDS. They're affordable. They're rich in protein, easily transported, and they can be used in what seems like an endless number of ways.

Americans can be proud of our leadership in the global fight against AIDS. I want to thank President Bush and members of both parties in Congress who are committed to this noble effort. We also need to make sure our investment is used as wisely and effectively as possible. That is why, earlier this week, I sent a letter to Ambassador Tobias asking him to make sure that food and nutrition are included as essential components in U.S. efforts to combat HIV/AIDS. I also asked Ambassador Tobias to keep Congress informed about whether and how we are meeting this important goal.

The second reason I support the WISHH program, besides our moral responsibility, is that food aid is in America's national security interest. Feeding hungry people at home and abroad makes us safer. We've known that for a long time.

After World War II, President Truman made food aid an essential part of the Marshall plan. President Kennedy later re-named that food-aid effort, fittingly, the Food for Peace program. President Truman also persuaded Congress to create the national School Lunch Program to feed hungry children right here at home. Not because of some soft-hearted idealism, but because of the high percentage of draftees during World War II who had to be rejected for service because they were suffering from rickets and other preventable childhood illnesses linked to malnutrition.

Today, many of the nations that are most threatened by HIV/AIDS are the same nations that are most vulnerable to the hateful ideologies of terrorism. We are in a battle with groups like al Qaeda for the hearts and minds of people in poor nations. Food aid strengthens our hand in this battle.

A few years ago, I was in a poor village just outside of Calcutta, India. We visited a feeding program where hungry children could come for a free meal. For many of them, it was their only meal of the day. They ate a grain mixture that was bagged in Peoria, Illinois. I will never forget seeing “Peoria” stamped on the sides of those bags. I thought, “what kid in America would even touch this stuff?” But these kids were jumping on it like it was Baskin Robbins. Before they ate, they said a Hindu prayer of thanks for the people who had sent them that food. I have never been prouder to be an American. Anyone who tells you that food aid is not a good use of American dollars needs to get out of this city and go visit some poor children, like those little kids in Calcutta, and see how much goodwill a simple bag of grain can create.

I applaud the President for including in his budget an increase in our international disaster-assistance budget. It’s the right thing to do. But these increased funds ought not to come out of the Food for Peace budget. This shouldn’t be a choice between feeding poor families devastated by a tsunami and feeding poor families devastated by AIDS. We are strong enough to do both, and we need a federal budget that does both.

The third reason I support the WISHH program is because I’m from Illinois -- America’s number-one soybean-producing state for the last two years in a row! Chuck Grassley hates to hear me say that, but it’s true. Iowa may beat us in corn, but Illinois is first in soybeans, and we’re proud of it.

Last year, just before Thanksgiving – the day we celebrate our nation’s rich bounty – the USDA released an official estimate that ought to alarm every member of Congress. The USDA estimates that this year, for the first time in generations, America will become a *net food-importer*. The idea that we would go from “breadbasket to the world” to a net food importer nation is crazy. For the sake of American farmers and hungry people throughout the world, our government has a responsibility to maintain and expand the markets for soy and other American agriculture products.

History shows us that food aid can help poor nations develop their economies. A third of the nations that once received food aid from the U.S. are now purchasers of U.S. food. Any program that can reduce the suffering of people with HIV/AIDS, strengthen our national security and help Illinois farmers is a good deal in my book.

Last year, several of us in the Senate formed got together and formed the Senate Hunger Caucus. I’m proud to be a founding member. We have Republicans and Democrats, blue-state members and red-state members. We’re all over the map, literally. But we all share a deep belief that feeding hungry people here at home and around the world isn’t simply the right thing to do, it’s the smart thing to do.

Using American ingenuity and American soy to feed people with HIV/AIDS is a noble wish. And together, we can turn it into a powerful reality. If we do, and if we also keep our promise to provide lifesaving antiretroviral drugs to more people with HIV/AIDS in poor nations, then maybe – instead of sitting on those benches waiting for bad news – those parents I saw in that clinic in South Africa walk out into that sunlit yard and have the strength to play with their own children.