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May Is National Hepatitis Awareness Month!

May 6, 2011 – **CHICAGO:** This month marks the 16th anniversary of Hepatitis Awareness Month in the United States. Viral hepatitis, particularly infection with Hepatitis B (Hep B) is a major cause of morbidity and mortality in Asian Americans.

More than 370 million persons worldwide have chronic Hep B infection, and 500,000--700,000 persons die annually from Hep B-related liver disease. Asian Americans make up approximately half of the 1.5 million persons with chronic Hep B infection in the United States. Most of them became infected with Hep B before arriving in the United States and, includes many who are unaware of their infection.

Facts You Should Know:

- Hep B remains one of the greatest health disparities between the Asian and non-Asian communities. 1 in 10 Asian Americans is chronically infected with Hep B and Asian Americans are 4 times more likely to die from liver cancer compared with the general population.
- Hep B is a vaccine-preventable disease but Asian Americans remain at a greater risk for Hep B compared to non-Asians because many come from countries where the HepB vaccine wasn't available until the 1990s. 70% of Asians in the Chicago metropolitan area are foreign-born and many Asian countries still don't require newborn babies to receive the vaccine, so if one of the family members is a carrier of the disease, the rest of the family is at risk.
- Most Asian Americans are infected with the Hep B virus as infants or young children, either from infected mothers who unknowingly pass the virus to their newborn babies at birth or exposure to blood from another infected child or adult with whom they live in close contact.

The disproportionate rates of Hep B infections in Asian Americans underscore the critical need for increased prevention strategies, as well as the importance of health reform that guarantees access to culturally and linguistically competent prevention services for all communities across America.

Hep B education, screening and vaccination needs to become a standard of care for Asian Americans which will lead to monitoring and treatment to prevent further infection. On May 12th, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) will announce its new *Action Plan to Prevent, Care and Treat Viral Hepatitis*.

The Asian Health Coalition and its partners look forward to seeing how the proposed plan will leverage new funding opportunities and integrate activities throughout DHHS to build true systems of care for high-risk individuals.