Welcome Remarks by Dr. José M. Zuniga
President/CEO, Fast-Track Health and Fast-Track Cities Institute

12 October 2026, Berlin, Germany

Guten Morgen und herzlich willkommen in Berlin! Good morning and welcome to Berlin! On behalf of Fast-Track Health and the Fast-Track Cities Institute, thank you for being here and for everything you have done to bring us to this moment.

Look around this room. You are the people who have turned commitments into services, evidence into action, and community demands into changes that have improved people's lives. Mayors and municipal leaders. Health professionals and researchers. Advocates and community organizers. People living with HIV whose leadership continues to move this response forward.

You have come from different cities, different countries, and different circumstances. Yet you share a conviction: that where someone lives, who they are, whom they love, or how much money they have should never determine whether they can live a healthy life. That conviction brings us together. And our conference theme – "Unity of Purpose" – challenges us to put that conviction to work.

We gather at a difficult moment for global health. Funding uncertainty and cuts threaten essential services. Political hostility puts rights and inclusion under pressure. Misinformation undermines trust in science and public health. And overstretched health workers and community organizations are being asked to meet growing needs with fewer resources. We must acknowledge what these pressures mean for people: an interrupted course of treatment, a missed opportunity for prevention, a trusted community service suddenly unavailable. We must also acknowledge the toll on those of you working every day to prevent those losses.

But we have seen what this movement can do when confronted with crisis. During COVID-19, you found ways to keep people connected to care. You adapted services, delivered medicines, supported neighbors, and forged partnerships under extraordinary pressure. Communities organized. Health workers persevered. Cities and municipalities mobilized. You demonstrated the value of local leadership grounded in trust, solidarity, and a determination to reach those most at risk of being left behind.

And over these past almost two years since we last met at the global Fast-Track Cities 2024 conference in Paris, you have demonstrated that resilience again. Amid disruption and uncertainty, you have worked to sustain services, defend hard-won progress, and protect the people who depend on you. We see you. We value you. And we are proud of you. Proud of your courage. Proud of your ingenuity. Proud of your refusal to abandon communities when circumstances become difficult, as they certainly have in each of our cities.

That resilience deserves recognition and it deserves support. We cannot build the future on the expectation that dedicated people will continually absorb every funding cut, every policy reversal, and every new crisis. Our responsibility as Fast-Track Cities partners is to provide you with tools, share best practices, and help secure the resources, political commitment, and cooperation that allow your work to succeed.

Despite the challenges we face, and given the resilience you have demonstrated, it may seem counterintuitive for me to say this, but that is why now is the moment to accelerate with purpose, in the spirit of the Fast-Track Cities movement: political leadership working alongside communities, evidence guiding action, equity shaping investment, and accountability measured in people's lives. It is during times of crisis that there is strength in numbers and the 600-plus Fast-Track Cities network is marching forward in solidarity.

Almost 13 years after the network was created, there is still a lot of work to do. We must reach the people our services are still missing. Close the distance between a scientific breakthrough and someone benefiting from it. Confront stigma wherever it appears – in a clinic, in a policy, in a neighborhood, or in our own assumptions. And now is the moment to think bigger even amid the challenges of our time.

We must ask more of ourselves than whether our programs are meeting their targets. We must also ask whether people are getting what they need to live well. Is someone receiving HIV treatment also getting support for their mental health? Can a young person access prevention without fear of judgment? Does a person leaving prison have a dependable connection to care? Can someone facing homelessness keep their medication safe, get to an appointment, and find a place to sleep tonight?

These are questions our cities and municipalities can answer through the way we organize services, invest resources, and share power. Thinking bigger means bringing HIV, tuberculosis, and viral hepatitis responses into a broader vision of health and dignity. It means connecting health with housing, mental health, social protection, and climate resilience. It means building partnerships around the whole person and giving communities a meaningful role in deciding what those partnerships deliver.

The experience we have gained through the Fast-Track Cities movement gives us a strong foundation for that ambition. We must carry its urgency, its commitment to equity, and its community leadership into the wider challenges facing our cities, while accelerating progress on the commitments that brought us together.

Over these next two days, I urge you to be generous with what you know and honest about what you need. Share the approach that worked – and the one that failed. Find the colleague who has solved a problem you are facing. Make room for the community voice that challenges your thinking. Then take something concrete home: a partnership, a solution, a decision, a next step.

Let Berlin be a place where we renew our confidence in what we can accomplish together – and leave ready to act with greater urgency and a clear sense of purpose. People are waiting for prevention they can access, care they can trust, and institutions that respect their dignity. They are counting on us to move. So, let's go. Go with courage. Go with ambition. Go with communities leading alongside us. And go with purpose until the commitments we make in rooms like this are felt in the lives of the people we serve.

Before I introduce welcome remarks by UN Habitat Executive Director Anacláudia Rossbach, I wish to thank our speakers, our oral abstract and eposter presenters, our partners (including those that hosted yesterday's satellite symposia), our sponsors, including Merck Sharp & Dohme, Housing Works, Ally Wellness, and our exhibitors. As important, though, I thank all of you for joining us in Berlin. Fast-Track Cities 2026 is truly a team effort.