



HIV: GETTING TESTED IS YOUR FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

HIV and AIDS infection rates are growing within the African American community at a disproportionate rate, forcing communities to be more proactive with diagnosis and treatment.



Nationwide statistics show HIV infection within the African-American population is growing at an overwhelmingly disproportionate rate, leaving communities struggling to cope.

African Americans make up 13 percent of the U.S. population, yet represented 49 percent of new HIV and AIDS cases in 2006, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In comparison, Caucasians represented 30 percent of new reported cases, while Hispanics represented 18 percent.

Overall, 56,300 new HIV or AIDS cases were reported in 2006. That equals to almost 26,700 African Americans testing positive for HIV. The disparity is even greater on the local level.

In 2007, 80 of the 109 new HIV cases in Cumberland County were in African Americans, according to the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services.

Elazzo McArthur is well aware of the figures. He is the HIV Program Coordinator and Health Educator with Operation Sickle Cell, Inc., a Fayetteville non-profit with a mission to prevent the spread of HIV through education and public testing.

McArthur says HIV has become a major health issue in the African-American community for a variety of reasons, including limited access to healthcare and the social stigma attached to HIV. Regardless, he says, HIV isn't going away on its own.

This is why he urges people to get educated, tested and treated for HIV and AIDS to reverse the current statistics. And he doesn't mince words with his message.

"We target the African American community," McArthur says, "because there's a greater prevalence of HIV in the African-American community."

Last year, Operation Sickle Cell provided more than 500 free HIV screenings throughout Cumberland County as a public service. Test results were confidential and given on the spot, thanks to a rapid testing method that involves painless mouth swabs. Results were often given in less than 20 minutes.

If a person is confirmed positive, they are encouraged to get counseling right away. They should also have a second HIV test to confirm the results.



McArthur says HIV and AIDS would be more of a public concern if people truly understood the impact. Healthcare costs to treat both can be astronomical over time for both the patient and community. And if left untreated, HIV can develop into full-blown AIDS, which is now one of the leading causes of death in the African-American community.

Abstinence is the only sure way to prevent the spread of HIV. However, safe-sex practices, education and testing are tools that can be used to fight both diseases.

Operation Sickle Cell targets people, particularly women, between ages 15 to 34 for their program. People who are sexually active and don't know their HIV status are advised to get screened. People with multiple sex partners, who have unprotected sex or use intravenous drug needles, are especially urged to get tested.

"We provide this service to anyone who wants to come get tested," McArthur says. "Just like HIV, we don't discriminate at all."

To request a free HIV test or more information, please call Operation Sickle Cell at (910) 488-6118. Testing is available Monday through Friday at Operation Sickle Cell's headquarters at 2409 Murchison Road from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Or you can go to the organization's Community Testing and Education Center at 328 Gillespie Street on Tuesday through Thursday from 6 to 9 p.m. Walk-ins are welcome at both locations.