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## AIDS rate prompts push for HIV tests

Atlanta ranks 10th among U.S. cities.

Activists, health officials say some groups still hard to reach.

By Sharise M. Darby  
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Saturday is National HIV Testing Day, and it's a reminder that Georgia has one of the highest AIDS rates in the country.

With 19.7 cases for every 100,000 people, Georgia ranked ninth out of all states, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The data is from 2007, the latest available.

Georgia had 1,877 new AIDS cases in 2007. In 2006, there were 1,589 new cases. The total number of AIDS cases in Georgia through 2007 was 33,847.

Not only was the state ranked high in AIDS cases, but the metro Atlanta area, including Atlanta, Sandy Springs and Marietta, ranked 10th of all the metro areas in the country for its AIDS rate of 23 cases for every 100,000 people, according to the CDC.

The high rate of AIDS in Georgia and the metro area has energized activists and the CDC to encourage people to get tested for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Dr. Gary Puckrein, president and CEO of the National Minority Quality Forum, says HIV is having a higher impact in the South. On Monday, the forum, a nonprofit research organization, unveiled an interactive database ([www.hivmap.org](http://www.hivmap.org)) that allows the public to view HIV rates for most counties in the U.S.

HIV continued on B4

## Groups offer free testing

HIV  
continued from B1

"Certainly, what we have seen over recent years is the face of the disease has changed, and there is a more substantial disproportionate burden in the minority populations," he said. "That could certainly be an explanation of what we are seeing in Georgia."

Organizations such as AID Atlanta are providing free HIV testing events this week in recognition of National HIV Testing Day. AID Atlanta is a nonprofit organization that provides education and support services for people living with HIV and AIDS.

Neena Smith-Bankhead, director of education and volunteer services at AID Atlanta, said, "The testing is free, and we are trying to make ourselves accessible to the community. We are also expanding our hours so people can try to make it before work or maybe a little after work to get tested."

Smith-Bankhead said she has seen an increased interest in HIV testing, but there's more to do.

"People are finally starting to heed the call and go out and get tested," she said. "But ... some of the people at highest risk still aren't coming out to get tested. There are still certain communities and certain populations that we are still having some trouble reaching."

According to Smith-Bankhead, these populations include African-American women and young adults.

One young adult who did heed the call was Michael J. Brewer, a 23-year-old from Oklahoma City who graduated from Morehouse College in May. Brewer, who has decided to get routine tests, participated in a free testing event Monday at a Kroger parking lot in Atlanta. The AIDS Healthcare Foundation and AID Atlanta held the event.

"It is such an important thing," he said. "Particularly people in my community, being black and gay, but all people should practice and get in the habit of being tested regularly."

As Brewer stepped into

### Want to get tested?

- Call AID Atlanta at 404-870-7700.
- Visit [www.aidatlanta.org](http://www.aidatlanta.org) for a list of free testing events in your area.
- Contact Georgia's AIDS and STD infoline at 1-800-551-2728.

### A few of the testing events

- 9 a.m.-6 p.m. today  
AID Atlanta Inc. 1606 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. 1-800-551-2728
- 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday  
Higher Living Community Impact Center Inc. 2450 Mount Zion Parkway, Suite 400, Jonesboro. 678-422-4787

the van, he exuded a sense of calmness. He sat right in front of the prevention counselor, who asked him a few confidential questions. While Brewer answered, the counselor opened the oral swab packet and asked Brewer to run the apparatus across his gums. After a few seconds, the test was complete. Brewer received a card with his ID number and left.

About 20 minutes later, Brewer was called back in the bus. He was relieved to hear that he was HIV-negative.

"I feel great," he said. "I'm thankful and grateful. ... It was very quick and painless. It was very routine. The staff was very compassionate and professional, so it was very easy for me."

And Shezha Shagarabi, 16, can agree. This North Atlanta High School rising senior, who attended Monday's event, said the process was a breeze. Shagarabi has never been sexually active, but many of her friends are. She wanted to be able to tell them about her experience and encourage them to get tested.

"The whole process, how it is done will be an eye-opening and learning experience for me," she said. "I wanted to experience this so, as a friend, I can let them know that this is not scary."

Both Shagarabi and Brewer hope nothing — fear, stigmas or myths — keeps people from doing what is right.

"Knowing is half the battle," Brewer said. "What you don't know, you can't fix. It serves you no purpose to not know your status. ... At the end of the day, if you do it for no other reason, do it for yourself."

## AIDS RATE PROMPTS PUSH FOR HIV TESTS by Sharise M. Darby

The story I wrote about the AIDS/HIV epidemic in Atlanta and National HIV testing day was by far my favorite learning, growing, and journalistic experience during my internship. After writing a few stories that my editor assigned to me at the beginning of the internship I decided I wanted to develop an interesting and engaging story geared towards a minority health issue in Atlanta.

I knew National HIV Testing Day would present the perfect opportunity for me to develop an entertaining, yet informative, story convincing Atlanta residents to go out and get tested and dispel any myths people may have about the disease or the testing process in general.

This story enabled me to go out and interview people and medical professionals within the community, actually participate in the testing experience myself so I could have a better understanding of my topic, and gain experience deciphering statistics and figures for my story.

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