

LOCAL & STATE



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KIRSTINA SANGSAHACHART/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Stephanie Morris of Davenport and her 2 children spread the message of HIV prevention at clubs, through rap music and on Web pages.

Anti-AIDS activists target disparities Messages tailored to blacks, others battle stigma of disease

By TYEESHA DIXON
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

More than 25 years after the first AIDS cases rocked the nation, rates are down. But some high-risk groups are still disproportionately affected — so awareness campaigns are tailoring messages to get their attention.

The numbers tell the story: In 2005, blacks accounted for about half of all HIV and AIDS

cases in Florida, but only 15 percent of the population, according to the state Department of Health. Hispanics accounted for almost 20 percent of all HIV and AIDS cases, but 18 percent of the population.

Men who have sex with men of all races accounted for almost 70 percent of all HIV cases for Florida men in 2005.

In Florida, experts say even though disparities still exist, they're shrinking — a sign the

VIDEO EXTRA

Reaching out

The Morris family seeks to erase HIV's stigma. See OrlandoSentinel.com/video

Bureau of HIV/AIDS.

"But the disparities are still quite high. You can see there are gaps between blacks and whites and Hispanics and whites."

The rate of newly diagnosed HIV and AIDS cases for blacks in Florida decreased more than 40 percent from 1999 to 2004, according to data from the Florida Department of Health

efforts are working.

"We've really had demonstrable success in bringing down HIV cases among blacks," said Spencer Lieb, senior epidemiologist for the Florida Department of Health's

PLEASE SEE **HIV, B5**

Activists: Stigma still stalls anti-AIDS fight

HIV FROM B1

HIV and AIDS cases for blacks in Florida decreased more than 40 percent from 1999 to 2004, according to data from the Florida Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The rate for Hispanics decreased almost 4 percent during the same period.

Experts say creative approaches to HIV and AIDS education are needed to target the issues that threaten groups at highest risk. In the black community, prevention can mean teaching women how to demand that partners use condoms. For gay and bisexual men, it may be handing out "safe-sex kits" at bars on Friday nights.

Stigma still exists

When Stephanie Morris found out she had HIV, the Polk County woman asked her 19-year-old son to write a song to teach others about the virus.

Two years later, Morris and her two children are sharing the message of HIV prevention at nightclubs, through rap music and on MySpace pages.

For Morris, erasing HIV's stigma is the key to battling the epidemic in the black community.

She said that before she became ill, she knew hardly anything about the virus, which she is not sure how she contracted.

"That's how it's getting spread around," Morris said. "People don't want to talk about it."

Experts say the lack of communication is one reason prevention programs are so important.

"As crazy as it sounds, in 2007 [the stigma] is still there," said Alisa Brown, program prevention manager for the Hope and Help Center, an Orlando-based HIV advocacy group. "We need to be upset about these statistics. We need to be

Resources

HIV/AIDS Information

Florida HIV/AIDS campaign
■ wemakethechange.com (in English and Spanish)
■ 800-FLA-AIDS

AIDSinfo, National Institutes of Health

■ aidsinfo.nih.gov
■ 800-HIV-0440

Central Florida Prevention Resources

Easy Access Resource, Inc.
■ easyaccessresourceinc.org
■ 321-441-4990

Hope and Help Center

■ hopeandhelp.org
■ 407-645-2577

Outreach Community Care Network

■ outreachinc.org
■ 800-700-5410

Stewart Marchman Center, Prevention on the Move

■ stewartmarchman.org/services_prevention.htm
■ 386-947-1483

outraged.

"But I think we're making progress."

Morris, 46, of Davenport said many blacks hold a misperception she once had — condoms are unnecessary if a woman can't get pregnant. In Central Florida, several efforts are focusing on that issue.

"Lots of men see condom use as a barrier," said Loretta Jennings, executive director of the Outreach Community Care Network, an HIV support group in Volusia County.

"If a woman wants to use one, it may implicate that she has something or may have

been unfaithful."

One program brings together small groups of people from the same gender and ethnic background to talk about safe sex, including ways to discuss condom-use with partners.

"It's about understanding the population, whoever that may be," Jennings said.

Efforts toward awareness

Another Central Florida program creates social events for gay and bisexual men. This is especially important in places where the gay social scene is limited to bars, said Jay Slicker, clinical director for the Hope and Help Center.

Handing out free "safe-sex kits" — which include condoms and HIV information — at gay bars is another of the center's programs.

And in Florida, the Department of Health hired a Hispanic AIDS coordinator to better lead efforts in that population, said Tom Liberti, chief of the Bureau of HIV/AIDS.

But despite the more targeted approach to HIV awareness, efforts to teach the public about the virus should not be abandoned, Liberti said.

"I think when the paradigm shift occurred, a lot of us did not think the job was finished with the general population," he said. "Some people think you can still get HIV from a mosquito."

As someone living with AIDS, Morris agrees. Even though her family is dedicated to raising awareness, some days are difficult, she said. For her, subtle incidents are often painful — like walking by former friends who will no longer speak to her or her children because of her HIV status.

"I try not to let [my kids] see me cry," Morris said. "If I'm alone or talking to God, I let it all out."

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The making of “Anti-AIDS activists target disparities” by Tyeesha Dixon

Although I battled some tough topics this summer -- speaking to a mother who lost her daughter to a backyard pool drowning and tackling scores of STD statistics-- this story was by far the most touching and career-changing for me. Stephanie Morris, the woman with AIDS featured in the story, still keeps in frequent contact months after the story ran. The reason? "You really have changed my life. I am so grateful." Morris's resilience and appreciation for life would make anyone reevaluate his or her own. I wonder if she knows how much she has changed my life too.

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