Race Against Time

As black AIDS rates rise and government efforts to slow infections fail, African-American leaders are finally stepping up their game.

November 28, 2006 By Linda Villarosa

For more than a decade, activists like Phill Wilson, executive director of the Black AIDS Institute, have been trying to get African Americans to pay attention as HIV/AIDS cases in our community have soared. “Our house is on fire!” Wilson often shouts during speaking engagements, slamming his fist on the lectern. “AIDS is a fire raging in our community, and it’s out of control!”

Despite the cries of frontline activists, as well as numerous television and radio reports, magazine and newspaper stories and even an Oprah segment, most black Americans continued to think HIV wasn’t our issue. Even five years ago, when it was clear that HIV was increasingly “a disease of color,” our leaders generally ignored the problem or gave it short shrift.

We have paid the price for that inaction. Blacks make up 13% of the U.S. population but represent half of all AIDS cases. The disease is the No. 1 killer of young black women between the ages of 25 and 34. In a major shift from 20 years ago, almost half of AIDS cases are concentrated in the South—where African Americans disproportionately live and which is home to seven of the top ten U.S. cities with the highest AIDS rates. Washington DC, which has a predominantly black population, is so alarmed by its rising HIV infection rate that the city health department rolled out a large-scale testing program in 2006. Results so far indicate that almost 3% of more than 7,000 people tested have the virus—more than double the national rate.

It’s hard to turn our backs on statistics such as these, so recently more black leaders have been facing the issue, particularly compared with the early days, when many assumed HIV was a gay, white disease. Because of the problem’s urgency—and its startling effect on African-American women—churches, social organizations, civil rights groups, politicians and celebrities are joining the fight. For the most part, these groups ignored the scope of the crisis early on and had to be dragged to the table. But they are sitting there now.

“Given the recent statistics, our organization has decided that we must be involved,” says Cheryl Cooper, executive director of the National Council of Negro Women, a nonprofit organization founded in 1935.

Below, some of the individuals and organizations that have stepped up to the plate:

Civil Rights Groups
Our civil rights organizations joined the fight embarrassingly late, given that the disease has been particularly devastating to poor African Americans, especially in the South. However, with new leadership in place, both the National Urban League (NUL) and the NAACP have taken a stronger stance.

In 2003, under the direction of former New Orleans Mayor Marc Morial, the NUL strengthened its focus on health issues, including HIV. The NAACP has now dubbed the fight against AIDS "America's new civil rights movement" and hosted an event at its last convention titled "State of Emergency, Our Emergency: the HIV/AIDS Crisis in the Black Community." That evening, both NAACP president Bruce Gordon and chairperson Julian Bond took HIV tests to raise awareness about counseling and testing.

"Lulled by media images that portrayed AIDS mainly as a white, gay disease, we looked the other way," wrote Bond in a Washington Post editorial. "AIDS is now in our house. It's now our problem, and we must come up with solutions."

Under the leadership of Myisha Patterson, the NAACP has vowed to help "eliminate disparities in HIV/AIDS." For more information, visit www.naacp.org.

Social and Civic Organizations
A number of black fraternities and sororities and social organizations, such as the National Council of Negro Women, the Links, and 100 Black Men of America have begun to grapple with how to communicate about HIV prevention to their members and encourage them to get tested.

The National Coalition of 100 Black Women (NCBW) was spurred into action by media reports of rising infection rates among African-American women. "Black women were raised to keep secrets and to not see sex as power," says Grazell Howard, an NCBW vice president. "However, we must make [HIV/AIDS] advocacy for black women in America and our families a priority. The first step is to talk about sexuality and sex and then finish with other actions."

In 2005, NCBW cosponsored a four-day national meeting of African-American women to discuss HIV/AIDS. NCBW has also partnered with the government and the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS to encourage education, testing and involvement through its chapters. For more information, visit www.ncbw.org or call 212.222.5660.

Politicians
Nearly a decade ago, the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) made a dramatic plea to declare HIV/AIDS a public health emergency. That helped establish the Minority AIDS Initiative, which funnels hundreds of millions of dollars to community groups involved in HIV/AIDS prevention and care.

Several CBC members remain at the forefront of the fight. In September, California's Maxine Waters, who led the CBC into the battle, introduced a bill that would require federal prisons to test

inmates for HIV at the beginning and end of their incarceration. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 1.8% of men and 2.6% of women in federal and state prisons are HIV positive. Rep. Elijah Cummings of Maryland, cochair of the Democratic HIV/AIDS Task Force, has been an HIV/AIDS activist for two decades.

Also representing California, Democratic U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee chairs the CBC's Task Force on Global HIV/AIDS and has led the development of every major HIV/AIDS bill since she entered Congress in 1998. Lee recently introduced legislation that would repeal the requirement that one-third of U.S. funds designated for international HIV/AIDS prevention efforts be spent on abstinence-only sex education programs. "We must demand an end to ideologically and politically driven abstinence-only policies that ignore the reality of women's lives," says Lee.

Both Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and Donna Christian-Christensen, MD, (D-V.I.) have worked to highlight the HIV/AIDS crisis among blacks globally. Christian-Christensen has been outspoken, particularly in the Caribbean. In August, Obama took an HIV test during a visit to Kenya to increase awareness of AIDS in Africa.

To learn more about the efforts of these members of Congress and how to support them, visit www.blackcaucus.com/home.htm.

Entertainers

Nearly from the start of the epidemic, celebrities such as Danny Glover and Mary J. Blige have helped educate their fans and raise money for prevention and care. Sheryl Lee Ralph is another longtime activist. In 1990, she created the Diva Foundation, which generates resources and coordinates activities to combat HIV/AIDS. She is currently performing *Sometimes I Cry*, a one-woman show that she wrote, inspired by real women living with the disease. "These women's voices have been silent for too long," says Ralph. For more information about the Diva Foundation and the schedule for *Sometimes I Cry*, visit www.divas simplysinging.com and www.some timesicry.org.

Actor/director Bill Duke was inspired to create a documentary about HIV/AIDS in the black community while researching *Cover*, a feature film he is directing that tells the story of a woman who discovers that her plastic-surgeon husband is leading an invisible life "on the low."

"I did a year's worth of research, and the statistics overwhelmed me," says Duke. "I decided that I had to make a documentary." That film, *Faces of HIV*, explores the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on black America through interviews with ministers, community leaders and men and women living with HIV. For more information, visit www.officialbillduke.com.

Churches

The black church is no longer ignoring the growing epidemic. Though many church leaders, silenced by ignorance and homophobia, refuse to address HIV/AIDS, growing numbers of ministers and parishioners are learning how the disease is spread, how to prevent it and how best to care for HIV positive community members.

Pernessa Seele, founder of the Balm in Gilead, an organization that encourages church participation in the AIDS fight, has watched church leaders become increasingly aware. In 1989, when she first organized a week of healing for AIDS, she attracted a handful of Harlem churches. As of this year, the Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS has mobilized more than 15,000 churches to provide AIDS education.

Seele offers this anecdote illustrating the radical change: “At Antioch Baptist Church in Cleveland, we convinced the pastor to teach about AIDS prevention, but he agreed to abstinence-only—that was it,” says Seele. “But after the fifth woman infected with HIV came to him, he realized that he had to do more. Now, the Antioch Baptist Church tests more people for HIV than the Department of Health in Cleveland.”

To involve your church, visit www.balmingilead.org. To learn more about how HIV is spread, how to treat and prevent it or how to become an activist, contact the Black AIDS Institute at www.blackaids.org and the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS at www.nblca.org.

What Has the Government Done for Us Lately?
Of course, HIV/AIDS is our problem, and we must come up with solutions to fight it. But our government must help. What can it do right now? First, support politicians like the CBC members mentioned in this article. Here are three more recommendations for Congress and the White House:

Spend more. At press time, Congress is bickering over the specifics of the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act, the federal government’s largest program for Americans living with HIV. Who should get the most money: rural areas or large cities? If millions are designated for HIV testing, will there be enough money left to treat people who will be newly diagnosed with the virus? Don’t make people fight for scraps—shift some of the billions of dollars spent financing an unpopular war into HIV/AIDS programs at home.

Devise a new strategic prevention plan. At the beginning of this century, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) promised to reduce the numbers of new HIV infections by half by 2005. That didn’t happen; new infections remain at 40,000 per year. Now that HIV increasingly affects African-American women, black men who have sex with other men and incarcerated people, what is the strategy for reducing new infections? The CDC’s HIV/AIDS prevention branch needs to tell us. One new goal should be instituting HIV education and condom distribution in federal and state prisons.

Stop linking HIV/AIDS dollars to abstinence-only. By law, at least one-third of the $15 billion of HIV prevention funds distributed through the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPfAR) must be used for abstinence-until-marriage programs that “are politically motivated and not based on science,” says Congresswoman Lee. Visit www.lee.house.gov to learn more about this issue and how to support Lee’s proposed legislation to stop this practice.

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