Do the Math: Black + New York City + HIV

A disproportionate number of African-American New Yorkers are “later testers.”

October 20, 2009 By Laura Whitehorn

Eighty-five percent. That number set the stage for a legislative forum hosted on September 22 in Harlem by the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS (NBLCA).

Eighty-five percent reflects the percent of New York City’s “late testers”—people who discover they have HIV only when they are already ill with AIDS—who are black or Latino. The statistic stands out among the continual cascade of numbers showing how HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects African-American communities.

Late testing means a reduced chance of living long, healthy lives for these people. Why? Because by the time they start HIV treatment, their immune systems have already sustained extensive damage.

The NBLCA did not convene the forum alone. Other community organizations—Harlem United, Dominican Women’s Development Center and Washington Heights Corner Project—cosponsored the event.

The groups united to address the problem of soaring HIV rates in these communities. C. Virginia Fields, president and CEO of NBLCA, and New York City Council Democratic Majority Leader Inez Dickens set the tone by arguing for the community to support passage of a bill to streamline HIV testing. The bill, Assembly Bill A 7892/Senate Bill S 5660, would make HIV tests a part of routine medical care by removing obstacles such as separate signed consent forms. Routine testing, they said, would benefit these communities and reduce that 85 percent, thus decreasing illness and transmission rates. (People unaware of their HIV status tend to have viral loads much higher than folks taking HIV meds, and higher viral loads translate into higher risk of transmission. People who don’t know they are HIV positive are also less likely to use condoms to protect sex partners.)

The Reverend Alfonso Wyatt, who chaired the NBLCA forum, called disproportionate HIV/AIDS rates “an issue of human rights” for Harlem and Washington Heights.

That 85 percent number also helped put into context the evening’s keynote address by Kellee

Terrell, author of “Manning Up,” a feature article on AIDS in African-American communities that appeared in the fall 2009 issue of *Real Health* magazine.

“No one is coming [to save us],” Terrell told the audience of 150. “If we didn’t learn anything else from Hurricane Katrina, we learned this.”

The journalist also highlighted a few statistics. “AIDS is the number one killer of black women ages 24 to 35—and it’s on the rise among our youth. So why aren’t we mad?”

Watch her speech, which was peppered by comments of enthusiastic agreement from the audience.

To read “Manning Up,” click here.

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