

AIDS activists not surprised by D.C.'s No. 1 ranking

Written by George E. Curry, NNPA Special Correspondent
Friday, 17 July 2009 13:15

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Given the District of Columbia's predominantly Black population, ignoring the AIDS epidemic for years and its large number of homosexuals, no one should be surprised that the nation's capital has the highest AIDS rate in the United States, a leading AIDS activist says.

The activist, Ron Simmons, president of Us Helping Us, a support group for gays in Washington, made his comments last week at a HIV/AIDS Media Roundtable here sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

In a question and answer session that followed the panelists' presentations, Simmons reacted to D.C.'s case rate of 148.1 per 100,000 people, which is by far higher than any other jurisdiction in the nation. In a distant second was the U.S. Virgin Islands with a rate of 31.4, followed by New York at 24.9. The national rate was 12.5 per 100,000 people.

Simmons said the numbers tell only part of the story.

"It could mean that because of HIV medications, people are living longer with HIV whereas before people would have died five years after the diagnosis," he said, trying to explain the high figures. "Now, they are living 10 or 15 years. So, there's going to be an increasing number of people living with the disease. Also, historically, the Black community had a very poor response to HIV in the early days. So why should we be surprised that things are getting out of hand?"

He said other factors are also at play.

"Another problem here in D.C. that may be unique, in terms of Black gay men, is that D.C. is considered the Black San Francisco," Simmons stated. "Many Black gays, such as myself, and lesbians have migrated here from places like New York City because the Black gay and lesbian community here is so vibrant."

A recent report by the D.C. Health Department disclosed that 4 percent of the District's residents are HIV positive, four times the rate considered a "generalized and severe" epidemic. The rate among African-Americans was 3 percent, followed by Latinos with 2 percent and Whites at 1.4 percent. That means that HIV/AIDS among each group was considered severe.

Although Blacks represent 52.9 percent of the District's population, African-Americans represented 79.4 percent of all HIV and AIDS cases diagnosed in 2007. Among Black men, 42.1 percent were infected as a result of having sex with men, 20 percent got the virus through heterosexual sex and 19.7 percent through drug injections. Another 5 percent of men were infected through a combination of having sex with men and drug use.

Among African-American women, 58.1 percent of those living with HIV/AIDS in 2007, most – 58.1 percent – were infected through heterosexual activity. Injecting drugs was second at 27.4 percent.

Among youth aged 13 to 24, Blacks were 81.4 percent of those infected. Of the 224 people who died after being diagnosed in 2006 with AIDS in D.C., 91.5 percent were Black and 6.3 percent

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were White, according to the city's report.

More than 70 percent of those surveyed reported not using condoms. Approximately 7 percent of Black men and 10 percent of those aged 40 to 49 and HIV positive.

"If you live in an area that's highly-infected like Washington, D.C. and where there's a lot of HIV in the Black community, you have to be able to recognize your risk and say that I need to be responsible for what I'm doing," said Tiffany West-Ojo, bureau chief of the Strategic Information Unit at the HIV/AIDS Administration of the city's Department of Health.

She said, "HIV is not a disease of gay people, it's not a disease of males or females. It's not a disease of transgender or the incarcerated or poor people or just people who are shunned. It's a disease that's severely impacting the residents of the District of Columbia."

And it's impacting some groups, such as gays and women, more than others.

"Women are not getting tested," said Patricia Nalls, founder and executive director of The Women's Collective, a local AIDS service organization. "One of the reasons I believe women are not getting tested is women have so many things on their plate, often women with children. It's about homelessness, hunger, health issues, mental health issues, violence --- lots of violence -- lack of quality health care. They don't have health care and if they do, it's not quality health care. As they're dealing with all of these things on their plate, they don't want to deal with another issue. They believe if they get tested, 'This is something else I'll have to deal with.'"

Ron Simmons said Black gay men also pose a special challenge.

"What we found in listening to men who were HIV positive, they know about HIV," Simmons explained. "They know about survival, they know the therapy, they know latex condoms are better than other condoms. They know all of that, but they are not changing their behavior." With his voice breaking, an emotional Simmons continued, "The reason they're not changing their behavior is that they're traumatized. Basically, the bottom line: They know how to save their life but they don't feel their life is worth saving."

He said other issues, such as poverty, lack of access to health care, homophobia, sexism and poor education must be addressed as part of any strategy to effectively combat HIV/AIDS.

He said, "What we need is a multi-prong approach that deals with the issues that each of these subgroups are facing."