

Color War? Part II: Minorities Hit Hard by AIDS Crisis

testing and reporting mechanisms in place by the State of Florida.

Fallon says that gay white men who are aware of the insurance risks of having their names and information revealed commonly use anonymous test sites. While anonymous test sites do ask certain demographic questions, the information is not reported to the Health Department. Thus, accurate testing results are hidden from public scrutiny.

All information obtained from confidential test sites is reported. Public health clinics serving minority populations are more likely to use confidential sites, and thus report higher HIV rates with these communities, Fallon says. "We can't get accurate numbers until every case is reported accurately and we know where this is going."

Pat Callahan Taylor is the Surveillance Manager for the Broward County Health Department's AIDS Surveillance Office. According to Taylor, all AIDS cases and HIV-positive test results are required by state law to be reported. Discrepancies arise because case reports were only required after July 1, 1997. Anyone testing HIV-positive before that date, or in an anonymous test site, is not included in county numbers, nor is anyone who tests positive outside of the state of Florida.

Thus, the People With Aids Coalition has spent the better part of last year advocating that gay men be retested. Numerous letters and articles in *The Express* have publicized this campaign.

Taylor's office is commissioned to gather the results from both testing sites and doctors. Another problem she says is fairly common is that physicians are required to report HIV positive people and AIDS cases to Health Department databases within 14 days of a diagnosis. Unfortunately, many private doctors fail to do this

Greg Scott, President of the local PWA Coalition, also confirms that the data is wrong. "[Gay men] are excluded from the map because a majority of those tested were tested at confidential sites. Many gay white men came here after being tested elsewhere but need services now that they are here."

The discrepancies in numbers directly affect the amount of funding the county and its AIDS organizations receive. The transient nature of South Florida, the testing center reporting mechanisms in place and the fact that a large number of HIV-positive people are tested in another state means that funds are determined on these numbers.

Planning Council reports directly state that a large majority of people with HIV were tested before 1997, tested in another state or tested anonymously.

Racial Divide Already On Radar

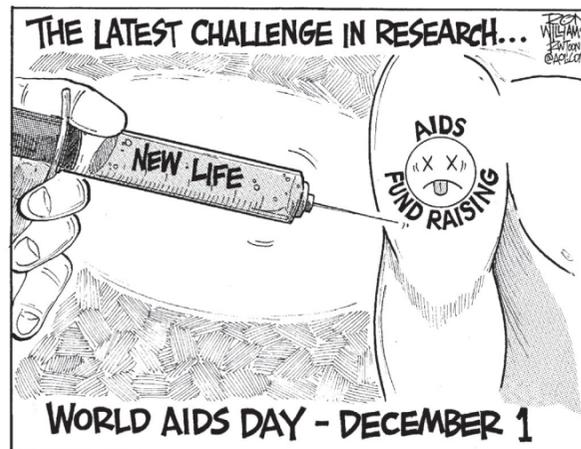
The fight over AIDS funding has been complicated by other racial factors. Parker claims that many white, gay men have been able to afford and seek out care from organizations skewed to them, while minority communities are still in big trouble as their numbers of both infections and deaths are skyrocketing.

Meanwhile, she asserts, Congress is now finding reasons to decrease the funding. She implies that now that AIDS is not mainly a white man's disease, it is getting less attention. Parker says, "It doesn't help the divide when our government allows the process to be skewed racially. The divide calls out to how much is going to be spent across racial lines. Minority communities cannot be serviced by minority agencies effectively because they don't have the funds, and the mainstream service organizations are not equipped to service minorities for many reasons."

Greg Scott agrees with Parker. "These

communities of color are in big trouble," he says. "There is no denying that. But they were not getting proper treatment in any area before HIV existed."

These reasons are largely credited to



lack of cultural sensitivity. Parker asserts that black men who consider the word 'gay' taboo and will not associate with anything connected to it are not apt to walk into an organization that features gay men on its staff and prominently displayed them in advertising.

Parker says that straight black men who contracted the disease through IV drug use or blood transfusions have to enter these environments to receive treatment even though they would prefer to be treated in their own neighborhood and community.

"The services need to be where the people are and they don't want to go somewhere all white or gay. The fact is that black men are sleeping with white men, white men are sleeping with white men, and black men are not telling the truth because of the hidden gay lives they are forced to lead due to homophobia in the black community."

The result is that bisexuality has become enormous within the black community. Black men, many of whom otherwise consider themselves straight and even have wives and girlfriends, often fool around with other men "on the downlow" only to run home and bring HIV/AIDS back with them.

According to J.L. King, an HIV-prevention activist, "A lot of guys who are on the down low have no shame in doing this. In our community, homophobia is so strong that these men would rather infect their girlfriend or their wives. Most of them prefer sex with women and for them the sex they have with men is just instant gratification and not about orientation."

New ad campaigns have even been created in urban areas for these "men who have sex with men" to directly target black and Hispanic men who will not respond to the word gay.

According to one unnamed African-American man who sometimes has sex with other men, "You can't be a black man in this society and be unmarried. There is a cultural pressure to make families."

Gay.com writer Keith Boykin asserts that, "As a result of changing norms, many black men have been left to reconcile their sexuality with their newly exaggerated sense of masculinity. The embrace of hip hop culture among black gay youth seems strikingly similar to the embrace of black church culture among many older black gay men who socialize in gay settings on Saturdays and then attend homophobic churches on Sundays."

The Florida Department of Children and Families reports that, locally and throughout Florida, men of color have a lower rate of identified homosexuality, but a higher rate of bisexual activity than whites. Surveillance data also indicates that bisexual men are more likely to use drugs and sex for money,

or spread HIV infection through both homosexual and heterosexual activity.

Taylor of the Health Department says that the stigma within the black community is often so great that many black people

entirely refuse to get tested or treat the diseases. This increases the numbers of deaths and cases that are not discovered until after it is too late.

PWAC's Scott feels that obtaining help should be the ultimate priority. "We learned the hard way in the beginning days of the disease that if you are going to get help you have to start by being truthful especially about sex. 'Silence=Death' comes from this. I have no sympathy for those who

will not go somewhere because of their own stigma and cannot take responsibility for who they are and their actions."

Zaida Castillo is acting Executive Director for the Dade County-based minority AIDS organization Union Positiva that services the Hispanic community. She says, "This is an issue about cultural sensitivity. People should go where they need to go but it is simply more sensitive to allow for them to go where they feel a sense of cultural commonality. It makes it easier on people who are going through enough as it is."

AIDS Community Calls for Unity

The need for funding within the AIDS community is omnipresent but those involved worry that racial differences will only hurt the community as a whole.

Francois LeConte of Haitian AIDS service organization Minority Development and Empowerment, Inc. says, "The one missing piece in this whole story is trust. When Congressional Black Caucus funds first came to Broward County, there was a lot of discussion about it. Black people on

Black Media Unites to Fight AIDS

(continued from front page)

Black media are the "ethical voice" in the community and need to provide more and better news about the AIDS epidemic, said Steven Wakefield of the HIV Vaccine Trials Network, a government-funded research network.

"We've not created a safe environment and what will fix that is breaking the silence," he said during a round-table discussion. "It's the number one killer of blacks. It should be the number one health issue."

The media executives, who made the task force announcement on World AIDS Day, said they can play a role in disseminating AIDS information that larger, predominantly white media companies have

the boards and councils said that they had a commitment to follow it and I am not sure they have been doing it successfully. I don't want mistrust to get in the way of us working together. We must service all people and trust will keep us together. I see a willingness from the community to make this work."

Scott also feels that the racial divide is ultimately bad for the community at large. Scott says that people should focus their questioning on the "Bushes and Congress" and not small organizations that are trying to do anything they can to wipe out the spread of the disease.

"I think the Federal Government is intentionally trying to set us against ourselves. The current funding and Planning Council framework encourages a great deal of infighting," Scott says. "Instead of putting the money into community healthcare, they have created a separate stream of money. It is not appropriate for different minority groups to fight amongst themselves. The enemy here is the lack of money being spent on the crisis. Congress is not procuring sufficient funds. We should be joining together under one voice. PWAC finds an ever-growing need unmet among all races and backgrounds in Broward County. This is about inadequate funding from Washington and Tallahassee."

The community-at-large seems to unanimously agree that lack of government funding is a unified concern. Planning Council President Nick Trivisonno says, "We as a community didn't divide ourselves. This came from HEPSEA and the Federal Government. They caused this separation."

The Wansiki Foundation's Alan Tiano agrees, "While Congress has good intentions, they do not always translate on the local level."

Parker does not broach the issue lightly. She says, "There shouldn't be CBC dollars at all because they have created a divisiveness beyond belief... I would rather not have further racial divide in the county and across the country. There should simply be more funds for everybody across the board."

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For example, they said, African-Americans distrust government research programs. Some conspiracy theorists have alleged that the government actually created the disease to kill blacks.

Black media can interview black researchers to help allay those fears, Fountain said.

Black radio stations, "the second most powerful influence in the black community outside of religion," have been enlisted to promote AIDS testing for vulnerable young adults, said Ernest Jackson Jr., president of Project WAVE, which stands for War Against the Virus Escalating.

The Texas-based nonprofit group has arranged for stations in Los Angeles, Houston and four other cities to offer free T-shirts and concert tickets to those willing to be tested, and thousands have accepted the offer, he said at a round-table discussion for AIDS activists and media executives.

Another tactic has been to air TV public service announcements by black and Hispanic celebrities, such as the singing group Destiny's Child, whose commercial urges: "Be a survivor. Get tested."

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