LESS STIGMA…MORE FUNDING NEEDED TO LOWER HIV/AIDS CASES

World AIDS Day events were a huge success this year with a mix of music, presentations and discussion surrounded by the overarching theme of ACT HIV/AIDS AWARE.

Approximately 125 showed up to hear the state of HIV/AIDS in Arkansas from experts that ranged from national advocates to grassroots citizens at the public forum titled ACT AWARE: Let’s Talk About It…HIV/AIDS in Arkansas on November 30.

Speakers were Amy Rosenberg, Harvard Law; Patrick Packer, Southern AIDS Coalition; Dr. Nate Smith, Arkansas Department of Health; Rick Collins, Arkansas HIV/AIDS Minority Task Force; Dr. Carmen Paniagua, AMHC Commissioner; Diedra Levi, Living Affected, Corp.; and Ann Dixon, Consumer Advisory Board.

The discussion was moderated by AMHC Medical Director, Dr. Creshelle Nash, who pointed out that the audience had a surprising mix of older adults and youth.

“This is a unique atmosphere,” she said. “It’s amazing to see two contingencies come together to discuss this disease that is affecting the young and old.”

Amy Rosenberg, J.D., opened the discussion with a shocking revelation that even though the number of cases in Arkansas may seem high (almost 6000); the scale is smaller as compared to other states. However, Rosenberg acknowledged that Arkansas does not invest in HIV/AIDS prevention or care.

“Not capitalizing or investing means that people with HIV are not getting the care they need,” she said.

Patrick Packer added that the south does not get a fair share of HIV/AIDS funding and the region is fourth in the country to receive resources. He stated that if everyone in the audience called the governor or their congressman change would happen.

“Everyone in this room can be an advocate” he said. “We must start a grassroots effort.”

The discussion moved to HIV/AIDS statistics in Arkansas. Dr. Nate Smith revealed there are approximately 25 positive new cases of HIV per month, which equals to 300 per year. He said of those 300, 50 percent are African American women.

In light of these numbers, Rick Collins expressed the need for individuals to take more responsibility.

“Numbers will continue to rise if individuals don’t take responsibility. HIV is 100% preventable,” he said. “If we don’t start practicing safe sex we are in trouble.”

Dr. Carmen Paniagua provided a Hispanic perspective regarding HIV/AIDS. She said that HIV/AIDS not only affects the African American community but the Hispanic community as well. She said that young Hispanic women are contracting the virus just as rapidly as African American women.
She added that in the Hispanic community, outreach and education efforts must be culturally relevant. She pointed out that migrants (documented or not) are hesitant to be tested because of their distrust of healthcare professionals. There is also a stigma of the “macho man” in the Hispanic community. There are many individuals living the MSM lifestyle but do not want to admit it.

Ann Dixon added that it is important to understand that HIV/AIDS affects everyone. It is not a gay disease or a black disease. She told the crowd of a friend who tested positive shortly after her divorce. She fell ill but doctors refused to test her for HIV—the friend was Caucasian.

“All Arkansans must understand that HIV/AIDS is not a minority disease, this disease doesn’t see color,” she said.

Diedra Levi founder of Living Affected, Corp. (formerly Brothas & Sistas) brought the issue of HIV/AIDS closer to home and put a face on the disease. She shared personal experiences of working directly with individuals living with HIV and AIDS. She spoke of a call from a crying woman whose husband was diagnosed with AIDS while in the hospital and the medication totaled $2800. She recalled a 19-year-old who wanted to be tested after his former partner tested positive, a straight white homeless man who went to her for something to eat and took a test to find out he was HIV positive and a man with 7 T cells who did not want to die alone.

She said, “Yes, Brothas & Sistas has been controversial, but we care about the individuals living with the disease... not just the disease itself. We saw that people were dying from this disease before the term MSM was coined. We knew that the amount of grief and loss, stigma, discrimination, fear, isolation and alienation nurtured mental health issues, miseducation and new subcultures.”

The audience responded to the panel discussion with a sense of urgency. Some said “what are we going to do about it and how do we get more funding in the state.” Audience members expressed disappointment that legislators failed to show up to the forum despite an invitation. One audience member spoke of Arkansas legislators stating “if you take the job, you must take on the issues of the state.”

P. Simms, a man living with HIV, felt the need to share his journey with HIV with the audience and the panel. He said, “People with HIV are not going to tell you they have HIV if they don’t think they will receive support. Personally, I appreciate the support of Ms. Levi. Those of us living with HIV need the social support.”

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World AIDS Day 2010 activities prove to be a success

On Wednesday, December 1st, the Arkansas Minority Health Commission with the Little Rock School District presented the ACT AWARE: School Tour 2010. More than 150 students received valuable information related to the transmission and prevention of HIV/AIDS. Shawn Linton of the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and group of college students provided a 30-minute presentation at J.A. Fair High School. AMHC’s Patricia Minor, R.N., Courtney Hampton and Karen Swinton of the Arkansas Department of Health HIV/STD, Hepatitis C Section addressed the students of Cloverdale Middle School. The tour included entertainment provided by Kane the Ladies Man of Power 92 and DJ Ricky Lee. A balloon release followed the presentation at JA Fair in which balloons were release in honor of the estimated 2000 people who have lost their lives to AIDS. Arkansas Minority Health Commission thanks JA Fair Principal Clausey Myton and Cloverdale Middle School Principal Willie Vinson for their partnership in the World AIDS Day School Tour!
ACT AWARE: World AIDS Day Gospel Celebration

World AIDS Day night, three-time Grammy Award winning gospel artist, Dorinda Clark-Cole and special guests, Dedric Jones and Chosen Praise and Bishop Kenneth Robinson and Chosen; the Southwest District Youth Choir and Harmony performed for a crowd of almost 500 at the ACT AWARE: World AIDS Day Gospel Celebration at the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center in Little Rock. Mistress of Ceremony was Sheree Evans of Hallelujah FM who offered giveaways to audience members who could provide HIV/AIDS information presented earlier during the event.

“The issue of HIV/AIDS needs champions like the Arkansas Minority Health Commission to fight this disease,” said Dorinda Clark-Cole.

Dorinda Clark-Cole wowed the crowd with her voice in honor of World AIDS Day.

Dedric Jones and Chosen Praise

Harmony

Bishop Kenneth Robinson and Chosen

Southwest District Youth Choir
On Sunday, December 5th, churches throughout Arkansas participated in **ACT AWARE: Compassion Sunday**. During this special program congregants learn about actions they can take in HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness.

**Participating Churches:**
- The Naked Truth Training & Empowerment Center, Inc
- Blytheville, AR
- Precious Grove Ministries, Croumrob, AR
- La Casa De Dios, Elaine, AR
- Morning Star Baptist Church, El Dorado, AR
- New Horizon Church, Fordyce, AR
- Silver Cloud Missionary Baptist Church, Helena, AR
- St. Peter Missionary Baptist Church 3518 W 7th St
- Little Rock, AR
- Tabernacle M.B Church, McGehee, AR
- Zion Travelers, Millwood, AR
- New Mt. Pleasant M.B. Church, Osceola, AR
- Jubilee Christian Center, Pine Bluff, AR
- New Fellowship Baptist Church, Pine Bluff, AR
- Share-A-Prayer and Word Church Fellowship Ministries, Inc
- Pine Bluff, AR
- Curry Chapel, Strong, AR
- Free Hope, Strong, AR

**Members of New Horizon Church in Fordyce decorate the church Christmas tree in red ribbons in honor of World AIDS Day.**

**AMHC Executive Director, Dr. Idonia L. Trotter highlighted the origins of World AIDS Day and encouraged faith-based participation.**

**A crowd of nearly 500 filled the ballroom of the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center in Downtown Little Rock.**

**Southern AIDS Coalition Executive Director, Patrick Packer, motivated the audience to take action and get involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS.**

**Compassion Sunday**

**Mistress of Ceremony, Sheree Evans of Hallelujah FM**
AMHC staff attends conference to enhance advocacy efforts

The Access Advocates Network Leadership Council of the Southern AIDS Coalition hosted the Advocacy Skills Building & Network Meeting in Birmingham, Ala. on November 17-19. The Arkansas Minority Health Commission’s Medical Director, Dr. Creshelle Nash and Nurse Project Manager, Patricia Minor, R.N., were invited to attend this meeting along with representatives from other southern states including Florida, South Carolina, Louisiana, Tennessee and Mississippi.

Over the course of this two-day training participants received information on how to include the Human Rights Framework in developing HIV/AIDS Advocacy Strategies, an update on Federal Issues and Linking to State Advocacy Efforts as it relates to the ADAP (AIDS Drug Assistance Program) crisis and the AIDS budget Information was also shared about the use of media in the HIV/AIDS strategic advocacy plan. Other topics of discussion included the growing epidemic in immigrant communities in the south, and the benefits of partnering with State AIDS Directors and Southern elected officials that champion HIV/AIDS issues.

During this meeting HIV/AIDS advocates were able to network, build advocacy skills, learn from each other and to begin to develop action plans to reach our collective goal of ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the southern United States.

Staff Accolades and Presentations

- Executive Director, Dr. Idonia Trotter, has been appointed to the Health Information Technology Consumer Advisory Committee
- Dr. Trotter has been appointed to the National Park Community College Health IT Advisory Board.
- Dr. Trotter was asked to present at Munn’s Chapel Baptist Church in Prescott during the Arise—Restore the Woman in You Conference in November.
- Dr. Creshelle Nash has been appointed by Gov. Mike Beebe to serve on the Health Information Technology Council. The council serves as an advisory body and oversees the operation of the health information exchange.
- Dr. Nash has been selected to serve on the DHS Medicaid Advisory Committee.
- Dr. Nash spoke at the 2010 Board of Health Educational Workshop in November.
- Patricia Minor, R.N., Project Manager of the Hypertension and HIV Outreach Initiative was reappointed to the Preventive Health & Health Services Block Grant Advisory Committee.
- Minor has been accepted into the UAMS Certificate Public Health program.
- Minor also met the requirements to maintain her status as a Certified Research Specialist.

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