

World AIDS Day reminds us that this disease hits close to home

by Marc_H._Morial

World AIDS Day, Dec. 1, recently served to remind us of the global as well as local health problem of HIV/AIDS. Major progress has been made in terms of medical treatment prolonging the lives of AIDS victims and those with HIV, but the disease, however, is still alive and well in the world as well as the United States, especially among blacks.

"We have made tangible and remarkable progress on all these fronts. But we must do more," United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said in a message for World AIDS Day.

Established in 1988 by the World Health Organization, World AIDS Day, in its 19th year, provides the opportunity for nations and their people to reflect upon the impact the disease has had upon their people and their lives. AIDS first reared its ugly head in the United States in 1981 when five gay men showed up at a Los Angeles hospital with a mysterious infection. But what started off as a gay man's disease has become more and more an African-American's disease more than 25 years later.

This year's commemoration culminated in a concert put on by Nelson Mandela's 46664 AIDS campaign that attracted an estimated 50,000 people to Johannesburg in South Africa, a nation where 5.5 million of its 48 million residents, or one in eight, are infected with HIV/AIDS, the world's highest rate. The United Nations estimates that 25 million people have died of AIDS.

With the backdrop of World's AIDS Day, the District of Columbia released harrowing statistics regarding the disease in the nation's capital, which may one day rival South Africa in terms of infection rates. One in 20 D.C. residents are estimated to have HIV, and one in 50 to have AIDS. Not quite the one in eight, but give them a few decades.

According to the D.C. report, 12,500 District of Columbia residents have HIV or AIDS. Of the 3,300 new cases between 2001 and 2006, 80 percent were among blacks and 37 percent contracted it through heterosexual sex. Overall, AIDS cases increased 43 percent - epidemic levels, setting off alarm bells among blacks and public health officials.

Part of the reason why blacks are reluctant to get tested is the perceived stigma of having HIV or AIDS. That bears out to some extent in the District of Columbia, where more than 70 percent of D.C. residents with HIV, a disproportionate number of them black, waited too long to be tested and saw their HIV turn into AIDS within a year of diagnosis. That compares to 39 percent nationwide.

"When was the last time you got tested for HIV? Have you ever been tested? If not, shame on you.

Knowing your HIV status is a fundamental responsibility for every black person," writes Phill Wilson, executive director of The Black AIDS Institute in Los Angeles, who has been HIV-positive for more than a quarter of a century and makes an impassioned plea for blacks to "get over" their fears and "get on" with treatment.

In the Urban League movement, 23 of our affiliates have programs aimed at reducing the risk of transmission of the disease within the black community. The Urban League of Greater Oklahoma runs a program designed to increase HIV/AIDS awareness among ex-offenders and senior citizens. Further south, our Dallas affiliate offers an AIDS-prevention program that has served 1,200 minority youths between the ages of 12 and 19 and shows them how to cut high-risk behaviors attributable to the use of drugs and alcohol and how to have safe sex, among other things. The affiliate also offers a program for drug-using adults over 18 that has served 925. And the Urban League of Hampton Roads provides case-management services to minorities diagnosed with HIV/AIDS to improve the quality and length of their lives.

Despite the efforts of the Urban League movement and many other groups, it is not enough, like the U.N. secretary said. But blacks cannot wait around for the government or society to come to their rescue and save them from HIV/AIDS. The black community must look within itself to resolve this crisis.

"This World AIDS day - it is all about us. When we have the courage to take action, we see results. When we wait for others to come to our rescue, well ... can anyone say New Orleans or Katrina?" Wilson notes.

He's got a point. Solving this crisis starts with encouraging all blacks to get tested and treated, if necessary. In the words of Wilson, "get over it and get on with it."

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