

**News feature story on HIV/AIDS in the District of Columbia written for the GW class  
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By Lauren Hepler

Access to a cell phone just might improve your sexual health in the District of Columbia.

Simply pick up the phone and dial 311 or text “DCWRAP” to 365247. Voila: a list of free condoms at nearby locations.

As the city continues to grapple with the nation’s highest HIV/AIDS infection rate at 3.2 percent, innovative new public health programs, invoking everything from cell phones to the Internet to revamped public service announcements, have started to curb this dangerous trend. A government report released this month shows that the number of HIV/AIDS-related deaths, as well as new cases of AIDS, fell by about a third in recent years.

“The district may have the highest rate of HIV in the nation, but it also has the most extensive network of services for care and treatment of a person living with HIV,” wrote Shannon Hader, director of the city’s HIV/AIDS Administration (HAHSTA), in a recent statement.

A 160-page epidemiology report, orchestrated by HAHSTA and the D.C. Department of Health (DOH), provides data on sexually transmitted diseases for the 2008 calendar year. The report also highlights numerous city programs aimed at curbing the spread of the disease.

DOH Director Pierre Vigilance wrote in a public letter that three strategies are key in the battle against HIV/AIDS: “Promoting” early testing and health education, “preventing” the spread of the disease through free STD screenings and “protecting” through initiatives offering free or discounted contraceptives.

An annual “resource guide” is also published online and distributed by HAHSTA, highlighting dozens of services for those seeking medical care or preventative treatment.

In 2009, the city began a program allowing residents to order 10 free condoms at a time online to be delivered to their homes. Officials said that hundreds of thousands were distributed, and the program will be expanded in the future.

D.C. also became the first city in the nation to offer free HIV testing in 2006, distributing testing equipment to hospitals and other medical offices citywide, according to the DOH Web site. Around this time, D.C. also began a program providing free or heavily discounted HIV medications.

The district set another precedent in 2009 as the first city to distribute free female condoms.

“Mayor Fenty and the DOH have made HIV/AIDS a top priority,” Hader said in a recent *Washington Post* article. “We want [residents with the disease] to be in care and stay in care.”

Most recently, the DOH began offering “partner services,” to inform sexual partners of those diagnosed with HIV or other STDs of potential exposure, providing guidance for seeking testing and medical care. Monthly workshops are offered in Northeast D.C., and attendants must register online at the DOH website.

AIDS is diagnosed when the blood cell count of a person infected with the HIV virus dips to dangerously low levels, compromising the immune system. Those diagnosed with HIV in early stages are often able to stall or prevent the progression to AIDS with medication.

While officials were pleased with the drop in new cases of AIDS, the report forecasted that the total number of those infected by HIV/AIDS, which amounted to over 16,500 people in December 2008, will continue to rise until the virus “peaks” and eventually stabilizes.

“We anticipate that as people live longer with HIV/AIDS... and we identify more people through initiatives such as routine screening, the number of people living with the disease will increase,” said Amanda Castel, the city’s chief epidemiologist for HIV/AIDS, in an interview. “There is no way to tell how close we may be to that peak.”

District law mandates all HIV/AIDS cases be reported to the DOH to allocate health services. However, recent City Council meetings raised concern over funding and resource distribution at HAHSTA, where past corruption by officials has left populations underserved.

The new data shows that one out of every 21 black residents and 14 percent of all gay males in the city are currently HIV-positive. Over three quarters of city residents with HIV/AIDS are black,

and black women are 17 times more likely than white women to be living with the disease, according to the HAHSTA report.

One out of every 47 Hispanic residents and one out of every 66 white residents are infected.

The report also showed that residents in D.C.'s poorest wards, located in the Southeast sector of the city, have the highest infection rates.

Castel attributed these disproportionate infection rates to a lack of access to resources.

“If a person is economically disadvantaged, he or she may not have regular access to health care or preventative care, may be uninsured or may have lower health literacy,” Castel said. “[These factors] may lead to riskier behaviors.”

The report also found that modes of transmission of the disease vary with race and gender.

“Men who have sex with men” now accounts for 37 percent of total male diagnoses, the report said, but “heterosexual contact” is the leading mode of transmission among black residents. Injected drug use accounts for 21 percent of male HIV/AIDS cases and 29 percent of female cases.

Of the 1,318 HIV/AIDS-related deaths that occurred from 2004-2007, almost a third of deaths were among those who contracted the disease through drug use.

“This is the most complete snapshot of these diseases that the DOH has ever compiled,” Vigilance wrote in the HAHSTA report. “We still have a ways to go, but the tremendous collaboration of government, community and residents is showing results.”

In the future, Vigilance wrote that the district hopes gather even more extensive data to lower infection rates for all demographics.

“There are many new research methods the district is exploring to better serve residents,” Castel said.

Until then, keep a cell phone handy.