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PORA hits the streets; Offers quick, free HIV tests in high-risk areas

By: Meagan Sexton

Outside of Oscar's Liquor Store on North Ninth Street on Wednesday, one young woman sat in her running car while two others stood patiently in the cold, waiting for the results of HIV tests given in the back seat of a van.

The program, operated by a Springfield nonprofit group, Positive Options, Referrals and Alternatives, is one of many AIDS outreach efforts throughout Illinois.

But AIDS and HIV remain persistent problems, both in Illinois and nationwide - and even figuring out whether the trend is up or down can be confounding.

Pete Fox, an outreach coordinator for PORA, and three other staff members travel to various high-risk locations in Springfield three days a week as part of the organization's Evening Street Outreach. On Wednesday, the PORA team stood outside in the cold for almost two hours, offering soup, coffee and condoms to passers-by and asking whether they would like to take HIV tests.

The painless test is determined by an oral sample, and the OraQuick testing device looks similar to an over-the-counter pregnancy test. With onsite counseling, the testing process takes about 20 minutes.

John Peller, director of state affairs for the **AIDS Foundation of Chicago**, said unpublished data compiled by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that the number of new cases nationally had been holding steady at 40,000 a year. However, CDC statistics indicate the annual rate recently increased to between 55,000 and 60,000.

Peller said it is less clear whether the increase is a result of more sophisticated detection and reporting methods, a sign that AIDS/HIV is being transmitted to more people, or perhaps both.

"Nationally, the trend has been that the number of cases have increased, and the case is not any different in Illinois," Peller said.

At the same time, preliminary data for 2007 compiled by the Illinois Department of Public Health in October showed a decrease in the number of HIV and AIDS cases reported statewide.

However, IDPH spokeswoman Kimberly Parker said those preliminary surveillance reports show only cases that have been reported to the agency. The data will change as local health departments, social service agencies and doctors report more cases, she said. Parker was unable to specify when concrete numbers for cases in 2007 will be released.

The CDC is trying to improve its collection and analysis of AIDS numbers, said Dr. Kevin Fenton, who works with the CDC's National Center for HIV/AIDS and other diseases.

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"Given the importance of the new estimates in guiding HIV prevention policy and programs, CDC's public health responsibility is to ensure accurate information," he said. "The estimates have been submitted for further analysis and rigorous scientific review to ensure the accuracy of the complex new methods and of the estimates themselves."

The CDC anticipates releasing new estimates early this year, Fenton said. Whatever the numbers show, PORA workers and volunteers say they see the need for their outreach efforts on the street.

"We are doing what we can to help and educate people," said Bernie Carver, director of PORA.

"People living on the street, when we're out working, it's like entering their living room," Fox said. "When they're going through good or bad times, after awhile they want to share that with you. It is kind of an intimate setting even though you're out in the public."

Detrick "Grace" Jones, 46, has been living in Springfield for five years. She said she tries to get tested at least once a month.

"I trust them, and I know it's safe to keep myself tested," Jones said. "The friends that I have had come get tested agree with me. It's a good thing that they come out here and take the time to come out and see about people."

Jones believes people in high-risk areas have become more responsible about taking care of themselves and want to avoid contracting the disease.

PORA also offers a long-term recovery home for survivors of prostitution, which Jones said helped her get back on her feet after getting out of prison.

"We have a very good success rate in our residential program," Carver said. "People stay with us about six months or more and have better than an 80 percent chance of staying out of trouble with the law and living independently. We are very proud of that record."

Fox said the outreach staff focuses on treating people like people.

"No one gets judged," Fox said. "It's really gratifying to see people react to kindness. It's the sincerity that I have really been amazed with. The staff and volunteers have shown a real compassion for people."