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Rockford Register Star



HIV/AIDS activists ask for Medicaid expansion

By Andrea Zimmermann

RRSTAR.COM

Apr 02, 2008

SPRINGFIELD — Joyce Terrell, 46, of Rockford cheered and waved her sign, “Expand Medicaid,” during a rally at the Capitol Wednesday as she joined 100 HIV/AIDS activists who came to Springfield to lobby for money.

“I’m not just speaking for me,” said Terrell. “For everyone who is HIV positive in the world, my voice is speaking for them.”

Terrell joined with other AIDS activists to ask legislators to expand Medicaid coverage and to include \$2 million in the state budget to provide more HIV tests to community organizations.

Terrell said she contracted HIV in 1991 through intravenous drug use, and continued using until a year ago when she found her way to the Total Health Awareness Group in Rockford, a HIV prevention group. She said she couldn’t hold down a traditional job because of the stigma attached to her illness and her drug use. Terrell said she eventually lived on the streets and made money as a prostitute.

“Maybe if I had the help I needed (when diagnosed), I might not have gone to the streets,” Terrell said.



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Cynthia Harriman (left), a case manager with Total Health Awareness Team in Rockford, and client Joyce Terrell, (with sign) cheer Wednesday, April 2, 2008, during the Illinois HIV/AIDS Lobby Day at the State Capitol in

John Peller, director of state affairs for the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, said a large number of the HIV/AIDS community is uninsured, and those costs are passed on to those who have health coverage because hospitals pick up that cost when the uninsured are admitted to the emergency room. Peller said about 67,000 HIV tests are given each year, and that the extra \$2 million would facilitate another 45,000 tests.

The group wants Medicaid to include individual adults earning up to \$10,400 annually. Peller said many people with HIV/AIDS fall under this category and are otherwise uninsured.

Peller said sharing dirty drug needles is a common way to contract HIV, and this measure would be a first step for outreach providers to begin talking to these people about safer practices that would help prevent the virus from spreading.

The Legislature's spring session is scheduled to end May 31.

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