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Website role-playing helps those diagnosed with HIV take the next step

By: Christopher B Sweeney

Nicki, 19, is studying to be a beautician but has recently been diagnosed with HIV despite being in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend.

James, a young gay man living by himself, tested positive for HIV three months ago.

Charles, 35, has been diagnosed with HIV after being addicted to heroin and using dirty needles to shoot up.

Besides being HIV-positive, what Nicki, James and Charles have in common is that they are all fictional characters on the new PEERSpeak Web site, designed to help people recently diagnosed with HIV in metro Chicago.

The site helps them better understand the process they will go through in getting treatment and the professionals they will encounter along the way, by putting them in the shoes of a social worker, an HIV specialist, a peer advisor, a case manager and a support group facilitator.

As users move through the site and play each role, they are introduced to characters like Nicki and James, who speak about the problems they are facing after being diagnosed with HIV.

PEERSpeak, which stands for Peer Empowerment Education Referral Station, was created by the AIDS Foundation of Chicago and Test Positive Awareness Network.

"I created the characters from the population that I currently work with. It came out of interactions I have on a day-to-day basis with the clients I have at TPAN," said Matt Sharp, director of education at the Awareness Network.

As users listen to the concerns of each character, they are required to answer a series of questions and advise the characters on specific topics people living with HIV encounter every day.

"The purpose of the site is to reach several groups of people. People who wouldn't receive their information in a standard way, like [from]doctors and service agencies," Sharp said. "They get their information from newspapers, word-of-mouth, sometimes teachers, but it's not as interactive and real for them."

An estimated 42,000 people in Illinois live with HIV, and more than half of them are in Chicago, according to John Clark, a communications specialist at the AIDS Foundation. Every year 1,000 people are diagnosed with HIV in the state, he said.

Ravenswood-based NogginLabs collaborated with the AIDS Foundation and TPAN to develop and program the Web site. While NogginLabs generally develops educational programs for corporate clients, they were happy to tackle such an important topic.

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"It's rewarding to see it applied in this new context where it will help improve quality of life," Chad Chmielowicz, senior project coordinator at NogginLabs, said in an email. "While the subject is sensitive, the reality is that HIV affects all ethnicities, genders, economic classes and age groups. The writing and characterizations underscore that fact."

The site has a resource section that provides links to Chicago-area services for people living with HIV.

"You'll get both accurate and useful information from the site," Clark said.

The site can be found at **www.aidschicago.org/afcpeers**.

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