

Confab discusses HIV among African American MSM

Chicago Free Press August 6, 2009

By Amy Wooten
Staff Writer

On Friday, HIV and gay activists, representatives of the ball community, service providers and others gathered to discuss HIV among African American men who have sex with men (MSM).

The “10: Living the Lifestyle Wellness Conference” was sponsored by AIDS Foundation of Chicago. The conference included plenary sessions and workshops.

Before the day began, AFC’s Jim Pickett brought up the media coverage on Chicago Department of Public Health’s recent behavioral surveillance data, which showed a large racial disparity (an HIV prevalence rate of over 30 percent among African American MSM). The survey also found that half of those who tested positive during the survey did not know their status. While reports are highlighting these statistics, they fail to mention the good news: “Most of those in the study get tested regularly,” Pickett said, adding that the HIV/AIDS community needs to focus on its strengths while addressing challenges.

Youth advocate Tommy Sampson (a.k.a. Father Tommy Avant-Garde of the House of Avant Garde), stressed the need for the community to step up and work together to address the high rates of new HIV infection among young African American gay and bi men.

“Until we are able to engage with them, things will not change,” Sampson said.

Before launching into workshop sessions, two plenary sessions took place. First, DePaul University’s Master of Public Health Director of Program Placements and Community Partnerships Grady Garner spoke about the importance of a historical perspective when trying to understand African American males. Service providers and others need to understand the African American ethos, or spirit, he said. When working with African American MSM, people need to consider the beliefs, values, customs, norms and practices unique to their community, or sub-community, such as the ball scene. And if you don’t know, ask.

“I’m also constantly learning,” Garner said.

Afterwards, CDPH epidemiologist Nik Prachand spoke more in depth about the new HIV behavioral surveillance data on Chicago MSM. According to Prachand, the study is significant because “It’s the first time we really have quantitative data of this (racial) disparity” that those working in the HIV field have known existed for so long.

“It’s not a Chicago issue,” he added. “These rates are comparable to other cities.” At least 20 other U.S. cities are showing comparable rates.

During his presentation, Prachand discussed how traditional explanations for the disparity, “old favorites” such as risky sex behaviors, do not explain this disparity. There were no statistically

significant difference between African American MSM and other groups in traditional indicators of risk such as unprotected anal intercourse, drug use and other categories. While some areas need further exploration, such as higher rates of marijuana use during sex among African Americans, “This can’t account fully for the enormous racial disparity,” Prachand said.