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By Billy Ocasio

¡Abre los Ojos! (Open Your Eyes!), the theme for the first annual National Latino AIDS Awareness Day on October 15, could not be more on target.

In the U.S., HIV/AIDS is the second leading cause of death for Latino men ages 35 to 44, and the third leading cause of death for Latinos overall in this age group. Since 1981, nearly 150,000 Latinos have been diagnosed with AIDS in the U.S. and more than 80,000 have died.

In Chicago, the AIDS rate among Puerto Ricans (26 per 100,000 residents) is second only to the rates among African Americans (41 per 100,000 residents). HIV/AIDS is also severely affecting gay and bisexual men of Mexican origin, with nearly three-fourths of Mexican men with HIV reporting homosexual contact as the likely mode of transmission.

Now considered the nation's largest "minority" population, Latinos in America face enormous social, economic, and health barriers—including HIV/AIDS—that put the future of our community in jeopardy. According to the Census, nearly 1 in 12 Illinois residents (1 in 10 U.S. residents) is a young Latino. With half of all new HIV infections occurring in people under age 25, Latino youth are at extraordinary risk for HIV infection.

Our community also continues to be disproportionately poor, uninsured, and suffering from high rates of addiction, diabetes, and other health concerns. Language barriers, discrimination, and fear of legal reprisals for those who are undocumented compound these challenges. Each of these factors affecting the health and prosperity of Latinos helps fuel the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

For National Latino AIDS Awareness Day, community leaders hope to educate Latinos and the community at large not only about the challenges but also the solutions.

We must redouble HIV education efforts and expand services proven to prevent the spread of HIV. People at risk of infection need to be encouraged to seek HIV testing, assisted in reducing risk-taking behaviors, and provided healthcare services. In order to help meet these challenges, I am supporting a \$1 million increase in the City of Chicago's HIV prevention budget. Despite the weak economy, the young people across our city, and in disproportionately affected communities of color, deserve our commitment to their future.

For information on HIV/AIDS and testing sites near you call the National AIDS Hotline at (800) 342-AIDS (English) or (800) 344-SIDA (Español). Get tested, get educated, and get involved!

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