

# National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day Raises Concerns

On February 7, Golden Rule Services joined other HIV/AIDS service providers in more than 100 cities across the U.S. in raising HIV/AIDS awareness in the African American community by participating in the sixth annual observance of National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (NBHAAD).

"Seventy-two African-Americans are infected with HIV every day," said Clarmundo Sullivan, CEO of Golden Rule Services. "African Americans make up approximately 13 percent of the population of the United States, yet almost half of the total AIDS cases reported in this country are among members of the Black community. In 2003 more African Americans were reported to have HIV/AIDS than any other racial/ethnic group. Locally, while African Americans make up only ten percent of Sacramento County, we total 23 percent of people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Not only is this disproportionate but it is unacceptable."

In response to the disproportionate rates of HIV/AIDS in the local African-American community, Golden Rule Services, in collaboration with Sacramento County HIV/Communicable Disease Prevention Program, has implemented several exciting HIV education, prevention and awareness efforts. Two of these efforts are its "Let's Talk About It" and "Don't Let Your Hook Up, Get You Caught Up" social marketing campaigns.

These campaigns asked local African-American community members to produce radio ads, billboard ads, television

commercials, brochures, comic books, safer sex house parties and incentive items to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS in the African-American community. The campaigns have focused on two specific target groups; namely African American heterosexual women ages 18-25, and women and African-American men who have sex with men (gay and non-gay identified).

"The impact of both campaigns has really paid off. Local African-American community members have shared how much they have appreciated our efforts to not only raise their awareness about HIV/AIDS but to

finally provide risk reduction materials and activities that were created by and for their communities," said Sullivan. "Local African-American community members who have seen the campaigns have expressed how shocked they were to learn how HIV/AIDS was disproportionately impacting their community and it has encouraged dialog between their family, friends and sexual partners. These

campaigns have even prompted some community members who have never tested for HIV to get tested."

In addition to the social marketing campaigns, Golden Rule Services also sponsors two other interventions: the Men's Soul Food Project, Sacramento County's only HIV prevention project targeting local African-American gay, bi and "down low" men and the Sunshine Project, Sacramento County's only HIV prevention project targeting local African-American gay, bi and transgendered youth.

Each project consists of three types of interrelated interventions: 1) bar outreach and recruitment activities; 2) two session group level interventions designed to promote self esteem, social support, and HIV risk reduction and 3) a set of follow-up resources and activities targeted to the maintenance of community building and safer sex behaviors.

The projects bring together these men to discuss their most important concerns in a friendly, confidential and small group atmosphere. Participants are also provided dinner, risk reduction materials and a \$40 gift certificate upon their completion. Participants can also take advantage of unlimited free condoms, lubricants

and HIV antibody testing.

Lastly, Golden Rule Services also conducts online HIV education and referral services in chat rooms frequented by African-American same gender loving men. Several hours a week, GRS staff identify themselves as Health Educators and provide men with an opportunity to go "live" with them to ask questions about HIV/AIDS or safer sex that they might not feel comfortable asking in person. Because many local African-American same gender loving men are "down low," they appreciate the idea of keeping their anonymity yet having access to HIV risk reduction materials and resources.

"Reaching African American same gender loving men is not easy but is very, very necessary. Because many of our clients experience sex role stereotyping, homophobia, sexual silence, poverty, racism, and have strong family and faith community loyalty, they choose not to be "out."

The literature suggests that these sociocultural factors may play a strong role in the disproportionate rates of HIV/AIDS in young African American same gender loving men. Also interesting to note is that many of our clients have a respectable level of HIV/AIDS education, however, they are still struggling with how they are treated as same gender loving men, even in the gay community! It seems that there are other forces besides the lack of HIV information that are putting our clients at risk."

To learn more about Golden Rule Services projects and resources, please call (916) 446-2437.

