

# From the Community

Guest Commentary by Clarmundo Sullivan

## After 25 Years of HIV/AIDS: Where is the HIV Epidemic Now? HIV Crisis in the African-American Community?

As local, state and national efforts in June 2006 were underway to commemorate 25 years of HIV/AIDS, I was contacted by the local media and asked if I thought HIV/AIDS was still perceived as a “white gay male disease.” I think a more important question is – What are we doing about it?

If someone had asked me that question 25 years ago, I would have responded that it appeared to be a disease disproportionately impacting white gay men because the first known cases of HIV/AIDS were reported among young Caucasian gay males in Los Angeles. Also, according to a July 1982 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, 95 percent of the total cases of the disease were among (MSM) men and 61.5 percent of the cases were among Caucasians

However, because the question was asked 25 years into the epidemic, my answer is quite different today. My response today is that while the gay community, unfortunately, continues to be

disproportionately impacted by HIV/AIDS it can no longer be perceived as a white gay male disease because the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been reporting a shift in the demographics of the epidemic. It now appears to be a disease disproportionately impacting the African-American community. Here are some of the disturbing HIV/AIDS statistics:

- Fifty one percent (51 percent) of all new HIV/AIDS cases diagnosed during 2001-04 were among African-Americans, making their rates of HIV/AIDS diagnosis higher than all other ethnic groups;

- In 2004, the rates of AIDS diagnosis for African-American adults and adolescents were ten

times the rate for whites and almost three times the rate of Hispanics;

- In 2000, AIDS was the leading cause of death among black men 35-44 and the third leading cause of death for all black men 25-44;

- Young African-American MSM today may experience higher rates of infection than any other population in the industrialized world, with rates of new HIV infections in some cities as high as those now seen in South African. In 2005, the CDC reported that in a survey conducted in several large U.S. cities, approximately 46 percent of African-American MSM surveyed in social venues were infected with HIV, and 67 percent of African-American MSM were unaware of their HIV positive status. In 2001, a CDC Young Men's Survey found HIV prevalence rates of 32 percent among young black MSM between the ages of 23-29.

So why is the rate of HIV/AIDS so disproportionate within the African-American community? The Center

for AIDS Prevention Studies and the CDC have identified several factors contributing to the high infection rates among African-Americans including stigma and homophobia, discrimination in education and employment, lack of access to health care and inadequately developed service infrastructure.

What is being done about this shift in HIV/AIDS statistics? National organizations such as the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors is advocating for a strong comprehensive response across all sectors-government agencies, non-government organizations, national AIDS policy organizations, community based organizations, AIDS service providers and state and local health departments to address these unacceptable rates of HIV infection among black MSM. The National Black Gay Men's Advocacy Coalition has made a strong commitment to encourage the federal government to better target African-American men

with prevention efforts and to channel more money to research the question why prevalence rates are so high among African-Americans.

The California Department of Health Services, Office of AIDS and the Sacramento County Department of Health and Human Services has implemented local initiatives and interventions to stem the tide of HIV within the African-American community.

The SOA has implemented the “Gay Men/Men Who Have Sex with Men HIV Prevention Initiative.” The goal of the initiative is to reduce HIV incidence and prevalence among gay men and non-gay identified men who have sex with men through research, programmatic and evaluation efforts. The policy focus includes integrating health and wellness into HIV prevention and care interventions serving gay men/MSM and requiring a strategic plan

COMMUNITY  
continues on page 38

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children. This ban was never about protecting children's best interests, and it's wonderful that it's been struck down."

"There is already a rigorous individualized screening procedure in place that ensures that only those who can provide a safe, stable, healthy home are approved as foster parents," said Leslie Cooper, a senior staff attorney for the ACLU Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Project, who argued the case before the court. "Today's ruling means that gay people will go through the same screening process as any other applicants, rather than be

automatically rejected no matter how qualified they are."

The case was filed on behalf of Matthew Howard and Craig Stoores,

who want to serve as foster parents in Arkansas by Cooper and James Esseks of the ACLU's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Project and ACLU of Arkansas cooperating attorney John Burnett represent the prospective foster parents.

More information on the case, Howard v. Child Welfare Agency Review Board, can be found online at [www.aclu.org/lgbt/parenting/12137res20050301.html](http://www.aclu.org/lgbt/parenting/12137res20050301.html).

that addresses the needs of gay men/MSM who use methamphetamine. Programmatically, the SOA is funding interventions that target MSM of color who do not identify as gay, gay men/MSM who use methamphetamine and gay men who use the internet.

The Sacramento County Department of Health and Human Services HIV/Communicable Disease Prevention Program launched its own innovative HIV prevention efforts targeting the African-American community. One of these efforts is 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 "Let's Talk About It" campaign focused on African-American heterosexual women ages 18-25 and women and African-American men who have sex with men (gay and non-gay identified). The "Don't Let Your Hook Up, Get You Caught Up" focused on local African-American gay men/men who have sex with men.

In addition to the social marketing campaigns, The County funds two other interventions hosted by Golden Rule Services: 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 Sonshine

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: bar outreach and recruitment activities; two session group level interventions designed to promote self esteem, social support, and HIV risk reduction; and a set of follow-up resources and activities targeted to the maintenance of community building and safer-sex behaviors.

Again, when referring to the original question, I think a more important question is what are we doing about it. HIV is not only about holding local, state and federal governments accountable in responding to the HIV/AIDS epidemic but also holding ourselves socially and personally responsible.

We must attempt to take precautions to educate ourselves about HIV/AIDS, identify potential behaviors that put ourselves and others at risk for HIV transmission and to learn ways in which we can get involved in the local fight against HIV/AIDS.

I encourage everyone to volunteer at a local HIV/AIDS organization, support local HIV/AIDS fundraisers or make financial or in-kind donations to HIV/AIDS service providers who are working hard to care for those affected and infected with HIV.

*Clarmundo Sullivan is the Executive Director of Golden Rule Services, a nonprofit, minority based organization that resolves health, education, employment and criminal justice disparities in People of Color communities through culturally competent programs and resources.*

save themselves.

Xena would be her former girlfriend. They still talk.

Also, Superlesbian would have a lesbian's understanding that what's going on around her is more important than how she looks. So, no taking time out to put on lipstick before rescuing a woman from a burning building.

However, flirting with a woman AFTER rescuing her from a burning building would be perfectly OK.

And getting her into your bed? High five!

Other do's and don'ts for our new community member.

DO: Learn how to repair a car (or at least pretend you know how), oil a softball glove, use a drill. These are crucial skills. Even the highest high femme has them. (Even I can oil a softball glove and I - heresy - hate softball.)

DON'T: Have a sidekick. Lesbians don't have sidekicks. They have best friends who they deny they are dating until they move in together and get married.

DO: Keep photos of yourself with a crew cut around to show that even though you now have long, curly hair, you earned your lesbian card just like everyone else.

DON'T: Pack. It's tacky in spandex.

DO: Follow etiquette when reserving a pool table, etc.

DON'T: Use your Superlesbian credentials to cut in line, date someone else's girlfriend, excuse yourself for voting Republican, or explain why you never learned to salsa.

DO: Add some pockets to that bat suit. You're going to need pockets. Every lesbian does.

Oh, Superlesbian, where are you? The world is waiting.

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must work harder than ever to see Angelides and the rest of our statewide Democratic ticket win in November. And they know that the Alice B. Toklas LGBT Democratic Club is key to their statewide success."

Also in attendance at the Pride Breakfast were the Democratic Nominee for State Controller John Chiang, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, Senator Carole Migden, Assemblyman Mark Leno, Supervisors Bevan Dufty and Tom Ammiano, District Attorney Kamala Harris, City Attorney Dennis Herrera, Treasurer Jose Cisneros and Assessor-Recorder Phil Ting, among numerous other elected officials.