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Valley center offers testing, services

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It's likely that more than 4,000 people in Arizona are infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, and don't know it, according to state and federal statistics.

Friday is National HIV Testing Day, with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention urging people to learn their HIV status. In Arizona, about 12,900 people know they are living with HIV, but the CDC estimates that 25 percent of all infected people don't know they have the virus. That means an additional 4,300 people who are positive and undiagnosed, according to S. Robert Bailey, epidemiologist in the Office of HIV/AIDS for the Arizona Department of Health Services.

The Southwest Center for HIV/AIDS, formerly known as Body Positive, will be open to help people who have the virus learn how to live productive, healthy lives. The center offers free HIV tests Mondays through Thursdays.



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The center tests about 1,400 people a year, and about 6 percent test positive for HIV. Those people receive counseling and other services.

The testing is just part of the center's mission, which has expanded over the past year. Its name was changed last month as part of the overall rebranding, says Lysa Fitzhugh, director of marketing communications and public relations.

"We did two years of research and found that people didn't know what Body Positive was," Fitzhugh says. "They thought it was a gym. They couldn't connect Body Positive with our HIV research and the resource center."

Since the founding of the center in 1990, the demographics of HIV and AIDS have changed. White men who have sex with men are still the primary group affected, according to statistics, but Black women are being infected at an alarming rate. They are seven times more likely than any other group to be infected, at a rate of 35 per 100,000 people, Bailey says. This compares with about 5 per 100,000 for other ethnic groups. No one knows why this is happening, but it's probably a combination of several factors, he says, possibly including poverty and limited access to health care.

In response, the center has partnered with Ebony House and pastors of Black churches to promote testing.

"There's still a huge stigma in the Black community about HIV, and if we can become more frank about testing, we can reach those people who wouldn't talk about it," says Carol Poore, president and CEO of the center.

Over the years, the Southwest Center for HIV/AIDS has expanded to more than 50 employees and dozens of programs, which served 25,000 people last year, of whom about a third have HIV, Poore says.

The center does not offer primary health care, but its services fall into three categories: testing and outreach, wellness and research.

Specific outreach programs target people at risk of getting HIV, including women, youth and transgendered people. Scott Haverstock, director of prevention, education and outreach, says that women need to be empowered to reject unsafe sex.

Other programs help people who are already infected.

"We help (HIV-positive) people build skills to live their lives without transmitting HIV," Haverstock says.

Various programs address other needs. One recent program sent families affected by HIV to summer camp at Mingus Mountain. Another program subsidizes medical care for the pets of people with AIDS. New programs include a grief and bereavement group, a Spanish-speaking therapy group, a creative-writing workshop, art therapy and a social networking group.

Take 5, the social group, has been a huge hit, says Jennifer Lewis, director of wellness and life management.

"It's hard for HIV-positive folks to meet other HIV-positive people, and this reduces social isolation tremendously," she says.

Wellness experts, who include naturopathic physicians, a pharmacist who specializes in drug-regimen compliance and registered dietitians, can help with medication side effects. A vitamin shop that sells high-quality nutraceuticals recently was added. Anyone can shop, and proceeds offset the costs of supplying clients with vitamins.

Several counseling groups are offered, for long-term survivors, women and other groups.

Research is a crucial part of the center's mission. Of the 28 HIV drugs on the market, the center has participated in trials for 26 of them. About two dozen medications are being tested there now. The center is seeking to partner with the business community and universities on broader research projects.

All of this expansion has made the McDowell Road headquarters cramped, and the center is looking for a larger facility in downtown Phoenix, Poore says.

"AIDS is here, and it's not going away any time soon," Fitzhugh says.

Details: The Southwest Center for HIV/AIDS is at 1144 E. McDowell Road, Phoenix. Call 602-307-5330 or visit www.swhiv.org.

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National HIV Testing Day was organized in 1995 by the National Association of People With AIDS to encourage routine testing. Here are some local testing sites. For more information, visit www.hivtest.org.

- Ebony House, in conjunction with the Black Nurses Association and the Arizona Department of Health Services, will offer free, rapid HIV testing from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday at Higher Heights Church of God in Christ, 1731 E. Wood St., Phoenix. Call Ebony House at 602-254-6180.

- Maricopa County Public Health offers free, rapid HIV tests at its clinic at 1645 E. Roosevelt St., Phoenix. 602-506-1678.

- Native Health at 4520 N. Central Ave., Phoenix, will offer free, rapid HIV testing to Native Americans with no appointments on Friday. 602-279-5262 or

www.nativehealthphoenix.org.

- Planned Parenthood charges \$65 for a rapid HIV test at its clinic at 4615 S. Central Ave., Phoenix. Call 602-268-1588 for an appointment.

- The Southwest Center for HIV/AIDS offers free, rapid HIV tests Mondays through Thursdays. The center is at 1144 E. McDowell Road, Phoenix, on the second floor. 602-307-5330.



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