

Church

(Continued from Page 1)
help get educate the community about HIV/AIDS.

"Churches are doing a better job at reaching people than the health department," Seele explains.

"What's happening is when people take a chance and go to the church, they find some of the retired nurses and folks that look like mama. They smell food cooking and it's a friendly environment. People are coming back to get checked up because they build relationships."

Seele stressed, "That's our culture." Because the church plays such a vital role in the Black community, Seele is concerned that the churches' hang-ups are having a negative impact on the health of African-Americans.

"I think often times the whole issue of sex and homosexuality stops the discussion of HIV/AIDS. Many church leaders don't know how to approach that issue, or they believe that homosexuality causes HIV. Since they are against homosexuality they don't talk about HIV," she says. Such views can be counterproductive in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

"The impact is grave in our community," Seele says. "I am always surprised that

so many believe that homosexuality causes AIDS. They don't address women and kids getting HIV through heterosexual contact at all. They believe if we get rid of homosexuality, we get rid of AIDS. The real issue is, we have a major crisis that is affecting our community and killing our children."

African-Americans represent only 12 percent of the population, but account for 54 percent of all new AIDS cases. Significantly, Black women are more likely to get AIDS from heterosexual activity than are White women.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 67 percent of Black women are infected that way, compared to 59 percent of White women.

Of newly-infected women in the U.S., approximately 64 percent are Black, 18 percent are White and 18 percent are Hispanic. Of newly-infected men, approximately 50 percent are Black, 30 percent are White and 20 percent are Hispanic.

The numbers for young people are equally alarming. HIV/AIDS continues to be one of the top five killers for teenagers. In 2000, 1,688 young people between 13 and 24 were reported having

AIDS, bringing the total cases among this group to 31,293. It is estimated that today almost half of new HIV infections occur among teenagers — and almost 65 percent of them Black.

Seele says the Black church must step in before the epidemic destroys the Black community.

"The first role of the Black church is to dismantle the stigma. It's the stigma that drives people not to get tested or treated. That stigma has its root in the idea that AIDS is sin. That has to change if we want to make progress," she explains. "Next, they must educate the community about the disease and provide information."

During the week of prayer, the Balm in Gilead will be helping churches do just that. The organization will help churches develop HIV/AIDS ministries, provide HIV/AIDS fact sheets and offer technical assistance and training. In a letter to pastors, Seele wrote, "On Sunday, March 6, and throughout the week of the 16th, Annual Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS, The Balm In Gilead is asking you, once again, to reach beyond your neighborhood, community, village or city, and come

together in prayer for the healing of AIDS. As we pray without ceasing, let us also provide prevention education forums, HIV testing stations, treatment education workshops — all for the healing of AIDS."

In addition to the week of prayer, the Balm In Gilead is also organizing an AIDS testing campaign this summer.

"At the end of the week of prayer we start working on our testing campaign. The campaign is in June and is called Our Church Lights The Way. We have to get tested because many people don't even know they have the disease," Seele states.

She says everyone has a role to play.

"It is everyone's responsibility to be talking. We should be focusing on HIV/AIDS and not Michael Jackson's sexual scandal. His business is not going to stop anyone from getting HIV," she says.

"We need to talk about it at breakfast, dinner, at school and on the bus. There are many churches that now have HIV clinics, testing services, and those churches need to be lifted up as model churches."

It's sometimes difficult for Seele to keep her spirits lifted.

"We've been fighting for 22 years and young people are still getting AIDS. Why?" she asks. "I feel like I, along with others, haven't done

enough. How can I be more effective? What can I do differently? I'm afraid for us as a people world-wide. This has a choke hold on us as a people."

And she says Black people need to respond. "We don't see the response of the Tsunami in the Black community," Seele notes. "We must understand what our responsibility is. We must fight this epidemic ourselves. If we just took 10 percent of what we spend and put it into HIV/AIDS resources, imagine what we could do."

For more information, visit www.balmingilead.org/wop2005, or call (888) 225-6243 and request registration information.

Christopher

(Continued from Page 12)
diabetes, and obesity.

For starters, concerned parents and adults can use the guidelines to create standards of "access to food" in their communities and engage local elected and appointed officials in bringing pressure to bear to change industry and institutional practices.

From local school board actions to improve the quality of school lunches, vending machine fare and exercise options, to increasing the availability of farmers markets, church-based food co-ops and wholesome food offerings in smaller stores, local residents can take actions to change their environments.

Some nonprofit groups have also increased transportation options by working with local cab and bus companies and chain grocery stores.

The good news is that the federal government is well into the nutrition game by raising the bar toward healthier eating. The bad news is that local communities of color will have to hit the fast balls out of the park if these new guidelines are to help win the battle against racial and ethnic health disparities.

Dr. Gail C. Christopher is director of the Health Policy Institute at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, D.C.

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