

Blacks must be better educated about AIDS

By **Makebra M. Anderson**
Special to Sentinel-Voice

OAKLAND, Calif. (NNPA) — No effort to curb the spread of AIDS among African-Americans will be successful without strong education programs, expert say.

"The importance of education is empowerment. Information is just facts. Once you have those facts and do something with that information then it becomes empowering," says Cheryl Hutchins, who started a community service organization called AIDS Volunteer of Cincinnati.

"A lot of consumers I work with don't understand how the virus is working, so by not understanding the virus, they don't understand the medication. By sitting down and explaining how the medication is working, it unlocks the door and becomes a powerful weapon. Right now that is the only vaccine we have — education."

Although African-Americans represent only 13 percent of the U.S. population, they account for 40 percent of the 929,985 AIDS cases that have been diagnosed since the start of the epidemic, reports the Census

Bureau. In 2003, Blacks represented 49 percent of the 43,171 diagnosed cases.

One expert, J. Lawrence Miller says after starting with education, efforts shouldn't stop there.

"This is more than a matter of education. There is a known statement that education is power. I will tell you that as a Black man with a Ph.D., education is not power — education is nothing more than introduction to power," says Miller who works for the Baltimore-based Black Educational AIDS Project. "If there is not a skill-building component with that edu-

cation it doesn't do you any good. Having a plate of food in front of you doesn't do any good if you don't know how to use the fork."

Miller recalls the exact moment he was educated about HIV/AIDS.

"I was in the Navy for nine and one-half years and when I got out of the Navy the last thing they did was give me an HIV test. I'll never forget my final physical; the doctor said 'Just make sure you ask anybody whether or not they've been tested.' That became a priority for me. So, every partner that I've ever had since then, the first question that I ask them is: 'When was the last time you've been tested?'"

He says that question isn't asked often enough.

"We live in a country where Black men take things out through our sexual power because it's expected of us to be Mandingo. That has been built into us for over 300 years, so we prove ourselves by being as sexual as possible. If we can convince you that you're powerful within yourself and you don't need to have sex or have a conquest in order to prove your masculinity, then you'll prioritize HIV."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report says that as of the end of 2003, an estimated 172,278 African-Americans were living with AIDS and accounted for 56 percent of all HIV-related deaths. In addition, the survival time after an AIDS diagnosis for Blacks is lower than it is for any other racial group.

Hutchins of Cincinnati believes that information is the key to improving those figures.

"The problem is getting the information at the basic

consumer level and that is why I started this community-based treatment program," she explains.

"It has really been a gift from God to be able to break it down where people understand it. It just takes someone who is willing to explain the information in laymen terms."

But that information has to be acted on, if progress is to be made.

"You have to be willing to put forth that extra effort because if you can't take care of you, then you can't take care of everyone else. As a care giver and single mom I'm beginning to learn that I've got to take care of me first."

For some AIDS advocates, education is everything. For others, it's not the first priority.

"I think the biggest problem is that there are not a whole lot of treatment programs that offer services around mental health and substance abuse," John Ward, client service coordinator of the Oakland-based AIDS Project East Bay said. "I think the community needs to create a place where people can go do deal with the substance abuse, mental health and their HIV/AIDS. It's great to talk about housing, it's great to talk about food, transportation and all that stuff, but it's putting the cart before the horse. If you don't deal with substance abuse, you're wasting your time. If someone is on crack, they are not worrying about making sure they take their medicine on time."

Ward should know. He was addicted to crack for 12 years.

"I knew I was HIV-positive, but that was the furthest thing on my mind because I was so addicted. It was emo-

tionally difficult for me knowing I was positive, but I just used more drugs. It wasn't until 10 years after my diagnosis that I even addressed it. I knew if I didn't get help, I wouldn't survive the addiction. HIV came after that."

According to the CDC, 43 percent of estimated AIDS diagnoses among African-American men in 2002 were attributed to sex with men, compared to 72 percent of estimated diagnoses among White men.

The CDC also reports that among Blacks, injection drug use accounted for 28 percent of new AIDS diagnoses and heterosexual sex accounted for 22 percent. Among Whites, 12 percent of new cases are attributed to injection drug use and only 6 percent are attributed to heterosexual sex.

Black women are more likely than White women to be infected through heterosexual sex. The CDC says that 70 percent of the AIDS diagnosis among African-American women in 2002 and 59 percent of diagnosis among White women were through heterosexual transmission.

For many, the numbers are frightening, but according to Nina Harawa, who works for the Los Angeles County HIV Epidemiology Program, they are not as bad as they sound.

"I think all of the attention on African-Americans and HIV and women and HIV is good, but I think people are getting confused. More Black women aren't getting HIV this year than last year. The data says more that the proportions are going up," Harawa explains.

"I think one of the reasons the proportion is higher is

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Miss Black Nevada

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Centennial parade in May with the Urban Chamber and Latin Chamber.

As the Nevada state delegate, her most important task will be to travel to Washington D.C. and compete in the national pageant. She will represent the Silver State with her platform: "Stomping Stereotypes: Promoting Tolerance and Fighting Hate."

This year's national pageant is being held on August 7, in Washington, D.C. at the Warner Theatre. The theme of this year's national pageant is: "Keeping the Dream Alive in 2005."

Each state is allowed to send one delegate to the national pageant. According to the organizer of the Miss Black Nevada pageant, Karen Lyew, a minimum of 30 young women will participate this year. For the first time the pageant will be televised nationally on the Black Family Channel, which is owned by Robert Townsend. It will also be webcast by the same online network that webcast this years Oscars ceremony.

The pageant will consist of two days of un-televised preliminary competition and a final night of televised competition. The young women will compete in the categories of Personal Interview, Question & Answer, Fitness, Talent and Evening Gown.

"The winner will receive an array of gifts and prizes. The majority of it will be scholarship money. There will also be awards of computers, cosmetics, and trips as well as many more prizes," said Lyew.

After the competition, each young woman will be given the opportunity to create a health and fitness initiative in their respective states with the assistance of pageant sponsor Bally Total Fitness, according to Lyew.

Each candidate will also make appearances at events around the U.S., as well as promote their platform.

"We are trying to promote the entire woman. This is not a beauty pageant. We are not exploiting our women; we are teaching our young women to be community activists."

"The delegates each have the opportunity to establish a platform or a cause that is important to them. Our delegates are doing wonderful things in their communities," she said.

Miss Black Nevada USA has used her

platform to teach diversity and tolerance to local middle school children. In addition to her community service, Phelps has many talents that could help her win this competition.

She will be singing in the talent portion of the competition. She has received accolades for her vocal talents in the past when she sang "Stranger in My House" in the "Showtime on Tour" production last year, and won the competition. She then had the opportunity to go to New York and sing live at the world famous Apollo Theatre.

As well as having vocal talent, Phelps plays soccer for the Nevada Soccer League.

Her talent on the soccer field helped her earn an athletic and academic scholarship to Lander University in Greenwood South Carolina, which she attended for her freshman year.

Phelps returned to Las Vegas in 2002 and began attending UNLV. She has an older sister who is earning her master's degree at Florida A&M, and a younger brother who also attends UNLV. After receiving her BA in linguistic studies from UNLV, where she is also studying the Arabic language, she plans to enlist in the Air Force as a linguist.

"I'm not naive. I know I will probably be sent overseas, but I don't mind. My ultimate goal is to have a career as an Arabic linguist for the Federal Bureau of Investigations," she stated.

She plans to use the Miss Black USA experience and her Miss Black Nevada title to expand her educational and professional opportunities.

Phelps is currently seeking sponsorship to defray the cost of travel to and from Washington D.C. as well as additional pageant expenses such as training sessions and entrance fees. A portion of all monies raised will be donated to the Children's Miracle Network.

In addition to sponsorship donations, Phelps is also accepting assistance with procuring the necessary wardrobe and accessories for the national pageant. Sponsors will be listed in the official Miss Black USA Pageant program book, she said.

For more information call (702) 806-8474 or email missBlacknevada2005@yahoo.com.

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