

U.S. shame: D.C. tops nation in HIV/AIDS rates

By George E. Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The disclosure that more than 4 percent of Blacks in the District of Columbia have HIV, matching San Francisco's citywide rate at the height of the epidemic in 1992, is but one example of how the disease is devastating the Black community. D.C. health officials made public a report Monday that showed the overall HIV/AIDS city rate of 3 percent is three times the level considered a "generalized and severe" epidemic.

One percent of the population is the standard yardstick used to measure a "generalized and severe" epidemic. In addition to African-Americans, that level was exceeded in Washington by Latinos — 2 percent — and Whites at 1.4 percent.

"Our rates are higher than West Africa" Shannon L. Hader, director of the District's HIV/AIDS Administration, told the *Washington Post*. "They're on par with Uganda and some parts of Kenya."

The city's 2008 epidemiology report found the number of HIV and AIDS cases had risen 22 percent from the 12,500 cases reported in 2006. As bad as things appear to be in the nation's capital, the report observed, "We know that the true number of residents currently infected and living with HIV is certainly higher."

The study says 7 percent of Black men in D.C. are infected. Almost 1 in 10 residents

between the ages of 40 and 49 has the virus. Approximately 3 percent of African-American women in the District of Columbia carry the virus, 58 percent of whom were infected through heterosexual sexual activity. About a quarter of Black women were infected through drug use.

Overall, 76 percent of the infected are Black. Heterosexual sexual activity was the primary mode of transmission for African-Americans at 33 percent. On the other hand, men having sex with men was the principal mode of transmission for Whites — 78 percent — and 49 percent for Latinos.

"I'm extremely angry and sad but not surprised," said Phill Wilson, CEO of the Black AIDS Institute, the only think tank devoted exclusively to the elimination of HIV/AIDS in the African-American community. "If you wanted to create the perfect storm for an explosive HIV/AIDS epidemic, it would look like Washington, D.C. You have a public health system that is totally overwhelmed, high poverty, low HIV literacy, a history of neglect, insufficient HIV prevention infrastructure and a general populace that is not mobilized."

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is what Wilson calls "a Black disease." Although African-



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Americans represent only 12 percent of the U.S. population, they account for half of all diagnosed AIDS cases. Black women represent 61 percent of all new HIV infections among women, a rate nearly 15 times that of White women. And, as was the case in Washington, most Black women are more likely to be infected through heterosexual

transmission. Black teens represent just 16 percent of those aged 13 to 19, but 69 percent of new AIDS cases reported among teens in 2006. A recent study in five major U.S. cities found that 46 percent of Black men having sex with men were infected with HIV, compared to 21 percent of White men having sex with other men.

This isn't the first depressing report about AIDS, so what's the answer to curbing the epidemic?

"For years, the Black AIDS Institute has been calling for a national Black AIDS mobilization," said Wilson of the Los Angeles-based Black AIDS Institute. "We've been calling for developing a 5-year plan with specific measurable goals and objectives to cut HIV rates in half, increase HIV testing by 50 percent, and increase utilization of HIV treatment and care by 50 percent. Every Black leader in America needs to stand up today

and declare a war on AIDS."

C. Virginia Fields, president and CEO of the National Black Commission on AIDS, also believes testing is a key to halting the spread of the disease in the U.S. She said health patients should be routinely tested for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

In about half of the states, a separate consent form is required to grant permission to test for HIV.

"It is time to remove that special requirement and make testing for HIV as routine as it already is for other diseases," Fields said. "It is estimated that 50 to 70 percent of new sexually transmitted cases are spread by people who don't realize they're infected."

Blacks tend to discover they are HIV positive later than Whites, meaning that many of them are late entering into treatment and, consequently don't live as long as others who were treated earlier.

If C. Virginia Fields and other activists get their wish and have AIDS testing incorporated into routine health testing, that will place a heavier burden on crowded counseling and treatment facilities. But it's not an insurmountable burden. The question is: Do we have the national will to take on this epidemic?

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Couple's mission: Show power of Black patronage

By James Clingman
Special to Sentinel-Voice

You have probably heard or read about John and Maggie Anderson, who live in Oak Park, Illinois, just west of Chicago, and their yearlong initiative to make all of their purchases from Black owned businesses.

This couple should be commended for such an effort and the sacrifices they are making to conduct their "Ebony Experiment." They are exemplary of what Black people must do to achieve true economic empowerment.

The Andersons, their tremendous sacrifices notwithstanding, are doing what Marcus Garvey and others espoused; they are showing what can — and should — be done by conscious committed Black people all over this country.

As usual, the detractors are calling the Ebony Experiment "racist and divisive." Some even commented that they would "now" only support White businesses. Isn't that amazing? I wonder what these same folks call Black people who have for years sup-

ported White-owned businesses.

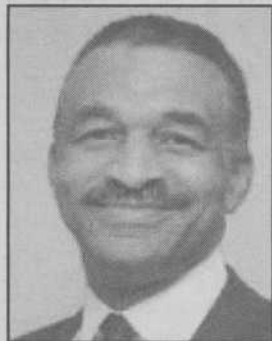
No one ever complains about the many China Towns, Greek Towns, and Jewish enclaves that promote and, indeed, provide mutual support to their businesses and consumers. I have never heard anyone call these people "racists" and "separatists" nor have I ever read where anyone ever responded to these ethnic economic enclaves by saying they would only buy from White-owned businesses.

Instead, Whites and virtually everyone else support the business owners in these enclaves. In fact, we celebrate their "entrepreneurial spirit" and characterize them as "educated and informed consumers," "self-supporting" and "hardworking" citizens.

Now that John and Maggie Anderson have started their quest to spend as much of their money with Black-owned businesses, some are characterizing them as villains and racists rather than forward-thinking concerned individuals who are trying to empower not only Black people but this country as well.

Black folks did not invent nor do we practice racism; we only react to it. For this effort to be characterized as racist is shortsighted, ignorant, incendiary, and disingenuous.

It is a real shame that this couple would have to endure any negativity for doing what is right; but it comes with the territory. Because \$850 billion moves through Black consumers' hands each year, more than 90 percent of that amount going to businesses owned and controlled by others, it is no surprise that turning a significant portion of that money inward to Black businesses is frightening to the establishment.



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Because Black people have been looked upon, and in many cases conducted ourselves as mere consumers rather than producers, any effort put forth since 1964 (Integration) has been squelched.

But whose fault is that? If we would take more control of our dollars, by making them have some sense, it would not matter who said what about our efforts to leverage our collective income into real wealth in our communities.

As I noted in my interview with Mr. Ted Gregory, writer for the *Chicago Tribune*, regarding the Ebony Experiment, this is not the first effort of its kind, but it is unique in its experimental aspects.

It could also be unique in its sacrificial aspects, in that the Anderson family has to drive long distances to make many of their purchases from Black businesses. Prior to integration, we did exactly what we are trying to get back to today.

There were Black cooperative buying programs, Buy Black Campaigns, Double-Duty Dollar campaigns, and other initiatives that brought Black consumers and business owners together in support of one another.

Maggie Anderson, who hails from Liberty City (Miami, Florida), an all Black community in 1950's, which thrived on mutual business support among Black people, is now doing her best to revive the economic spirit of her childhood community. As I noted earlier, their sacrifice has not come without naysayers and outright "haters."

According to the *Tribune* article, among the responses received by the Andersons was an anonymous letter mailed to their home accusing them of "unabashed, virulent racism." The writer stated, "Because of you, we

will totally avoid Black suppliers. Because of you, we will dodge every which way to avoid hiring Black employees."

See what I mean? That kind of thinking is totally misplaced and hateful. But with \$850 billion on the line, there is no telling what kinds of reactions and retaliation this family will get from ignorant, one-sided, and narrow-minded folks who want to maintain status quo when it comes to business development and growth among African-Americans.

With all of the hurdles and obstacles they face, this paragon of a Black couple has made a commitment and is following through on that commitment, which is, on its own merits, very commendable, especially when it comes to doing something positive for Black people. They truly deserve our support. Drop them a line or an e-mail and tell them you appreciate what they are doing, and then get involved by starting your own Black buying "experiment" in your city.

Through the Andersons' efforts, Black-owned businesses will be discovered by other consumers, minds will be changed about buying Black, and consciousness will be raised among Black consumers. I trust that everyone else who reads this and learns about the Ebony Experiment will consider what John Anderson said: "Focusing the estimated \$850 billion annual Black buying power on Black businesses strengthens those businesses and creates more businesses, more jobs and stronger families, schools and neighborhoods... When a thriving African-American or urban community is realized, certainly as a society as a whole, we all win."

Much love and God speed to the Anderson family. For more information on this initiative, go to www.ebonyexperiment.com

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and the bigots want to claim them invisible. They actually think the Stimulus Bill is a "Black Thing" since it is coming from a Black president. They indeed are panicking and perhaps we shall help them with a formal Title VI Complaint (Civil Rights Act) to make them change their racist ways. We will and do the same for a few other Neanderthal states. After 27 years maybe California will come into compliance with the DBE program that Parren J. Mitchell wrote.

Things are looking up!

Harry Alford is the co-founder, President/CEO, of the National Black Chamber of Commerce, Inc.