

Getting the word out

The Urban League seeks to widen the discussion of HIV/AIDS issues within Portland's African American community

by Inga Sorensen

The Urban League of Portland is making a concerted effort to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in the metropolitan area, particularly among the African American community.

The Portland chapter is just one of a handful of the National Urban League's 115 local affiliates to establish its own HIV/AIDS community outreach office, which is designed to provide prevention education and connect people living with HIV/AIDS with appropriate services.

"Different groups in our community have different needs," says Terry Durst, an Urban League staff member involved in HIV/AIDS education and outreach efforts. "Women who are HIV positive need a support system that is appropriate for their culture. Young people who are HIV positive are often cut off from their families. The rate of infection for African American men is nearly five times greater than for white men."

Durst, who spent several years working on HIV/AIDS issues in Seattle before coming to Portland four months ago, says it is imperative that there be an aggressive prevention campaign in light of the growing number of African Americans directly impacted by HIV and AIDS.

"Though we don't have the double digit figures of African Americans with HIV seen in other major metropolitan areas, the rates are growing and they will continue to grow unless we do something about it," he says.

The Urban League of Portland has a total of six staff members who have received training in providing HIV/AIDS education to communities of color. Several staff members discussed their work during the first annual African American Wellness Conference held earlier this month in Portland.

"AIDS service organizations like Cascade AIDS Project or the Northwest AIDS Foundation [in Seattle] are beginning to target men of color. While that may be true, such agencies don't necessarily have the staff or experience with people of color communities," says Durst.

He believes the Urban League, with decades of history within the African American community, is in a position to effectively sponsor HIV/AIDS prevention efforts within the community, as well as network and build solid relationships with other HIV/AIDS service providers.

"African American men and women may not feel comfortable going to CAP, for example, because it has traditionally focused on gay white men," says Durst. "Our prevention efforts focus on addressing AIDS in culturally relevant ways. Many of the prevention messages have failed to speak to people of color. Let's face it, a poster of two gay white men probably isn't going to speak to an African American woman with children. Materials need to speak to people, and people need to feel comfortable in a setting that allows them to receive those prevention messages."

Durst says there is a certain level of reluctance within the African American community about discussing AIDS, sexuality and homosexuality.

"These are things a lot of people don't want to get into," he says.

Urban League staffer Ameera Saahir, who assists with HIV outreach and education efforts, agrees: "There is a lot of discomfort and denial in our communities about HIV/AIDS issues, which

hampers open discussion and access to care services. We are working to create a caring environment in which the African American community will feel more comfortable about discussing this issue, and in which those who are HIV positive can be more open about their condition and use available services."

Additionally, Durst says many African Americans may have a series of other issues to contend with, including violence, economic disparity, racism, unemployment and substance abuse.

"Because of all these other issues, health matters often go unaddressed," he says. "Try talking to an African American woman who is trying to feed her kids. She's thinking about how to survive, not how to stay safe when it comes to HIV. The key is to address related issues."

The Urban League of Portland has launched a number of HIV/AIDS education/prevention and client services programs. Those efforts include providing financial and technical assistance to a support group known as FRIENDS and skills-building groups like Brother to Brother and the Quilt Project, and offering an HIV/AIDS education program for youth of color (funded by the Columbia Willamette Area Health Education Center).



Urban League staffers Cecil Prescod (left), Ameera Saahir and Terry Durst

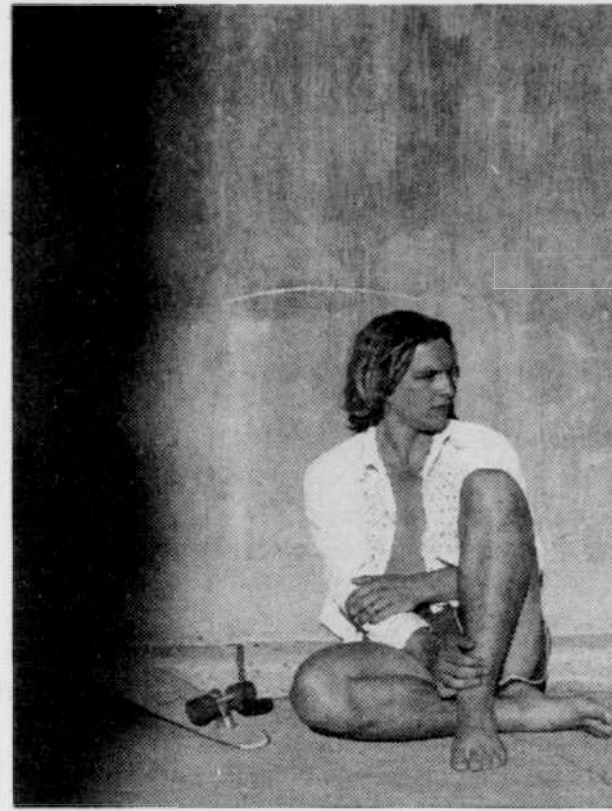
The League has also created an advisory board comprising African American health professionals whose meetings are open to the public, and is conducting outreach to increase awareness of available HIV care services with an emphasis on women of color in North and Northeast Portland.

Funding for the Urban League's programs comes from a variety of sources, including the Multnomah County Health Department. The organization recently received a grant from the Fabric of Life Foundation that will support its "Nguzo Saba Community Buddy System," a project designed to bring people with HIV/AIDS from isolation into a nurturing community.

"While there is a level of conversation about HIV/AIDS within the African American community," says Durst, "I think it's fair to say that the level is not enough to impact, i.e., stop the spread of this disease. To do that, we need the support of schools, religious institutions and community organizations."

Durst says the Urban League could always use more volunteers to assist with HIV/AIDS prevention projects. The group is also "re-energizing" its advisory board. "The more voices, the better," he says.

For more information about the Urban League's HIV/AIDS programs, call 280-2600. The next advisory board meeting is scheduled for 6-8 pm Sept. 26, at the Urban League, 10 N Russell St. in Portland.



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