

AIDS still on increase in rural Minnesota

Organization serves individuals who face stigma of the disease

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HIBBING — Tammi Hoard has worked as a medical case manager for the Rural AIDS Action Network (RAAN) for the past three years.

She's seen her caseload rise from about nine cases to 22.

RAAN, which serves HIV positive individuals living in the rural areas of Minnesota, added 80 new clients just last year, Hoard said.

"We're not seeing a decrease by any means and that's kind of sad," she said.

Hoard serves in RAAN's northeast region. She serves people who are HIV positive living in Itasca and St. Louis counties, except those living in the city of Duluth.

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. It is a virus that weakens a person's immune system by destroying white blood cells called T-cells or CD4 cells. HIV is a virus that the immune system can't rid itself of and leaves the body open to other infections. It can lead to AIDS, according to AIDS.gov.

AIDS stands for acquired immune deficiency syndrome. It is the final stages of the HIV virus. A person is considered to have AIDS when they contract certain infections, cancers or have a very low T-cell count, according to the Web site.

On Tuesday people the world over recognized World AIDS day to call attention to the disease, which is continuing to spread.

More than 7,400 people in the world are infected with HIV each day, and it's estimated that 33 million people are living with the disease, according to a release from the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH).

An estimated 6,220 people are living with HIV/AIDS in Minnesota. About 320 new cases are found in the state each year, according to the MDH.

Locally about half of HIV-positive patients are women. The patients are all different ages and many are in heterosexual relationships, Hoard said.

Hoard works as a medical case manager for her clients. She helps them to take care of their basic needs so that they will be ready to manage their disease.

She helps clients who need it to find housing, insurance, doctors and transportation to their appointments. She also offers emotional support.

She serves to help prevent the disease by educating people on HIV in the communities she serves.

Kids today don't understand how serious AIDS can be, and they don't understand how it is spread, she said.

There are four ways to contract HIV — through blood, semen, vaginal fluid or breast milk.

Risk factors for the disease include having unprotected sex with people whose sexual background you don't know; using injected drugs or steroids, during which equipment and

blood were shared with others; and exchanging sex for drugs or money.

People who have been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease have an increased risk of getting HIV.

Hoard speaks to students about the disease at Hibbing Community College and some public schools. She also offers a free testing service for anyone who think they may have been exposed to the disease.

It's important for individuals who engage in activities that could put them at risk to test early, so they can begin treatments and not spread the disease to others, she said.

According to the MDH, about a third of the people diagnosed in 2008 were "late testers" who already had AIDS were soon to develop it. HIV usually develops into AIDS after five to 10 years. MDH attributes the low testing rates to "cultural and language barriers, social stigmas and limited access to health resources and care."

Stigma against the disease is prevalent in northern Minnesota, Hoard said.

"People think that it just can't happen here (that) it happens somewhere else," Hoard said.

When HIV started spreading in the early-1980s it was seen as a gay disease, and many people in the area still associate stigma with the disease, she said.

People judge HIV-positive individuals through a mentality focused on sexual orientation or drug use. Also many people fear contracting the disease by coming into contact with an infected individual.

The stigma surrounding HIV keeps individuals from getting tested, which can lead to its spread, Hoard said.

Adding to the "it just can't happen here" attitude is the fear of local AIDS patients who keep their disease a secret because of the fear of stigma.

About two-thirds of local HIV-positive patients are paranoid. They won't tell their families about the disease, or go to a doctor or pharmacy in their home town because "they're scared to death that the word will get out and people are going to ostracize them," Hoard said.

"... They're just afraid that people will not come near them and they don't want to chance that."

The stigma persists because the public isn't educated about how the disease can and cannot be spread, she said.

A person cannot get HIV by hugging a person with the disease or sharing a drink from the same cup. However, they should avoid sharing personal hygiene items such as a toothbrush or razor, she said.

"By educating yourself you're not going to be afraid to be someone's friend or get yourself tested," Hoard said. "Education is key to just about anything — then you know true facts, and you don't have to be scared."

RAAN supports the local population by talking about risk prevention. The organization gives out condoms and information about how to procure clean syringes.

The organization also offers testing services. Those interested in receiving testing can get more information by visiting RAAN.org. They can also contact Hoard at 888-647-7226 or by e-mail at tammi@raan.org.

If you have any fears or qualms “just get tested,” Hoard said.

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Myths and misconceptions

The growing HIV infection rate is fostered in part by dangerous misconceptions that persist:

- AIDS is a “gay disease,” affecting only homosexuals.
- The HIV virus is transmissible by mosquito bites.
- AIDS is curable.
- HIV-positive status is an immediate death sentence
- An infected person cannot pass on the virus if he or she is being treated.
- AIDS is a problem only in Africa.
- Sterile needles remain sterile even after they’re removed from the packaging and shared with other injected drug abusers.
- Birth control pills offer protection from HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases

— Information from the Rural AIDS Action Network Web site RAAN.org

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