



## **News Release**

For Immediate Release

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### **Rural AIDS Action Network Plans Strategic Realignment Statewide to Better Serve At-Risk Populations**

#### ***Service Expansion Planned in Southwestern Minnesota***

Little Falls, Minn. – Rural AIDS Action Network (RAAN), the statewide nonprofit organization working to raise awareness and help prevent HIV/AIDS, while providing support for HIV/AIDS clients in rural Minnesota, is implementing a strategic relocation of several offices and staff during summer 2011. This realignment will better position RAAN staff to address changing demand for testing and support services.

The following changes are being made:

- RAAN services are expanding into Southwestern Minnesota to increase accessibility to prevention services and medical case management care, especially for Spanish speaking and African-born at-risk populations and those who already have HIV/AIDS.
- RAAN headquarters, and its five person staff, will move from Little Falls to St. Cloud. The new address – effective July 5, 2011 – will be 300 East St. Germain, Suite 220 – St. Cloud, MN 56304 -320-257-3036, fax number 320-257-3038.
- The Mora office will close, and the medical case management staff relocated to St. Cloud.
- The Moorhead office will close in late summer, with the Bemidji office staff taking over prevention services and case management responsibilities for clients in northwestern Minnesota.

Existing offices in Mankato, Alexandria, Grand Rapids and Bemidji will continue operations.

The number of active HIV/AIDS medical case management clients in Southwest Minnesota has increased from six in 2006 to 32 through May 2011, necessitating additional staff, working from the Mankato office initially. “We're especially seeing a growing need for services among those of Hispanic origin and African-born individuals. We want to provide staff in this area because medical outcomes are often better when rural clients have regular access to an infectious disease specialist and RAAN staff to help coordinate that care,” said RAAN Executive Director Charles Hemeck.

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RAAN served nearly 1,000 individuals last year, providing prevention services, such as HIV testing, for 736 clients, and medical case management for 225 individuals who are being treated for HIV/AIDS.

Statewide, there were 370 new cases of HIV in 2009, a record, 17-year high, according to the Minnesota Health Department. The number of new cases has trended slightly downward statewide since then. There were 331 new cases reported last year.

Across rural Minnesota, individuals - including a greater percentage of women and minorities - are contracting the HIV virus, due in part to persistent misconceptions

Hempeck says there is a lack of understanding among the general population about who is at risk of HIV/AIDS. "Many people still believe this is a disease affecting only gay men. Others mistakenly believe AIDS is curable. In fact, anyone can be at-risk, depending on their lifestyle and behaviors. And quality of life is enhanced if HIV status is determined early through testing so the individual can get appropriate medical treatment," Hempeck adds.

The latest rural Minnesota data indicates 34 percent of RAAN's clients are women, and 43 percent of the clients are people of color. Sixty two percent of RAAN's clients are *below* the federal poverty guidelines.

"In rural Minnesota, many individuals are unaware of their HIV infection, and they may be symptom-free for up to a decade, continuing to unknowingly infect others," says Hempeck. "We're asking at-risk men and women to take responsibility for their health and the health of others. Testing is quick, free, and confidential."

To determine your risk factors for contracting HIV, please visit **[www.raan.org](http://www.raan.org)**. RAAN has established a **toll-free hotline – 800-966-9735** – to schedule a free, confidential HIV test and to obtain information about HIV prevention.

**For more information, please visit [www.raan.org](http://www.raan.org).**

*The Rural AIDS Action Network (RAAN) is fostering knowledgeable, caring communities which ensure quality services and support for people affected by HIV/AIDS.*

**Media Advisory: To interview RAAN Executive Director Charles Hempeck, please call 1-800-966-9735.**