HIV in Black communities

By Andre Watson
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HIV targets African Americans at a huge disproportion causing them to lag behind other ethnicities.

As of June 2012, 21,348 Chicagoans were living with HIV and 978 were new cases, said Yaa Simpson, an epidemiologist for the Chicago Department of Public Health and delegate to the recent International World AIDS conference.

Help is on the way. The only roadblock is the discussion on whether or not early prevention treatment is necessary.

The Black AIDS Institute recently hosted a two-day post conference at Mercy Hospital's Family Health Center to discuss the latest information some of its members learned at the World AIDS conference.

Attendees were able to network, attend workshops and hear presentations on current HIV/AIDS scientific and biomedical research. The latest HIV-prevention solution requires patients to take a pill each day to reduce their chances of becoming infected with the virus.

Previous research has demonstrated the early prevention pill is effective, however, despite scientific evidence that shows when people begin treatment early, their life span increases, PrEP is still being debated. CDC officials said there needs to be more research to determine the side effects.

Keynote speaker Darrell Wheeler, dean and a professor at Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work, discussed his recent study by going through a slide show.

The study focused on the impact community-level intervention strategies can have on Black men who have sex with other men in order to decrease the HIV infection rates. African Americans are much more likely to be diagnosed with HIV than others, Wheeler said. He added that African Americans usually fall into one of two categories. They either never learn their status or they get tested, but don't get treatment.

Current intervention methods for African Americans are not working the way they should, he said, adding Black people are more than the color of their skin, but they vary from one another.

He said researchers need to look closely at behavior patterns in communities and even examine culture and U.S. history before implementing intervention strategies. He calls it Culturally Tailored Intervention.
"You can't make an intervention for every person. You have to recognize that every person who fits into a group doesn't neatly fit inside the box 100 percent, and so you have to develop interventions that may work for an Austin community versus a Bronzeville community," said Wheeler.

Intervention must happen in the community, but it can not interfere with its culture, he said.

"If we know in a particular community everyone hangs out on the basketball court on Saturday and they don't go to the library, well then we need to take the intervention to the basketball court," he said.

Born HIV-positive, 19-year-old Dominique Wilson of the West Side understands first hand the importance of knowing one's status.

He's the youngest member in the Chicago's Black Treatment Advocacy Network, aimed at decreasing the spread of HIV in Black communities. He shared his personal journey and looked everyone in the face when he told his status.

"I want to make a difference in the world," the freshman business major at the University of Illinois Springfield said.

Wilson's message seemed to have affected everyone in attendance that night. Austin resident Patricia Massey sat through the four-hour event that went two hours over and said she was impacted by Wilson's speech.

"Hearing that young man speak and to see him want to get involved and help out was very inspiring," Massey said.

She had a conversation with her daughter who is away at school about the event. What Massey wants to see more of in her neighborhood is public awareness.

"I don't have a solution, what I have is energy. We're going to keep doing events, even if it's just for the choir in the room. We're going to keep teaching truths and realities," said Simpson.