CHAMPS Against HIV

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A. Toni Young has developed a new way to fight HIV among African Americans in Washington, DC: take members from the community, educate them about HIV prevention and testing, and send them back into their own neighborhoods to educate others. That's the idea behind the CHAMPS (Community HIV/AIDS Model Prevention Services) program at DC-based Community Education Group (CEG).

"We don't wait for an individual to come in and say give me a test, we go [to them]," says Young, the founder and executive director of CEG, who's HIV negative. Armed with street knowledge of their communities and the desire to make a difference, CHAMPS training program participants undergo 75 hours of testing and field training for certification in HIV testing and community-based outreach. Then it's into the neighborhoods they already know so well. While on the streets, they educate residents about the risks of contracting HIV. And they even test individuals for the virus, linking those who test positive to care and services.

Is CHAMPS' goal to reach high-risk African Americans successful? Definitely. CHAMPS tests about 2,200 people yearly and distributes more than 150,000 condoms.

African Americans account for the majority of HIV cases in the nation's capital—a city already facing daunting challenges that increase the HIV burden. "Three percent [of all DC residents] are living with the virus," Young says. "We are also looking at an unemployment rate of 14 percent—add in individuals with a history of incarceration, and that's more like 50 to 60 percent [of the black community]."

The program has changed thousands of lives—including the CHAMPS participants. "It has given me a chance to give back, mostly to [women]. They learn their status, and I lead them into care," says J'Mia Edwards, former CHAMPS training program participant and current CHAMPS counselor, who was diagnosed with AIDS in 2008. Five years ago, Edwards learned her HIV-positive status in a South Carolina Prison, where she didn't receive HIV care.

But she surpassed those difficulties and was transformed in the process."When I learned my status and went through the system, it wasn't easy to access services as far as support groups, health care [and medical] insurance," Edwards explains. "That made me want to become an advocate to make the process easier for others."

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