Latinos in Crisis

The Latino Commission on AIDS (LCOA) released a report on July 30 titled The Crisis of HIV/AIDS Among Latinos/Hispanics in United States, Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands. The report makes the case that HIV/AIDS "has reached a crisis level" for Latino people, which are the fastest growing population in the United States.

August 6, 2008 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Latino people represent about 15 percent of the U.S. population and its territories, but they were about 22 percent of the diagnosed HIV/AIDS cases in 2006. According to the report, Latino people were nearly three times more likely in 2006 to die of HIV/AIDS than non-Hispanic whites. Although they are the second most affected group behind African-American people, the report argues that Latino people often "are not consulted when decisions are made" by government on HIV/AIDS.

"The global community needs to be aware of these facts, our struggles and our commitment to advocate for a comprehensive response for those impacted by HIV/AIDS," says Dennis de Leon, LCOA president, in a statement. "I will continue advocating for all individuals to routinely test for HIV, for culturally competent prevention services and access to care, we all deserve that."

LCOA acknowledges in its report that important steps already were taken earlier this year. In January, a summit in Washington, DC, resulted in the creation of the National Latino AIDS Action Network (NLAAN), a coalition of individuals and organizations such as LCOA. NLAAN adopted a national action plan at the conclusion of that summit to guide its future efforts. In June, NLAAN released a document with federal policy recommendations.

The challenge now is making tangible progress toward implementation. The LCOA report intends to make progress on these issues by getting attention at the International AIDS Conference from August 3-8 in Mexico City.

"We need AIDS awareness both in Spanish and English in our community," says Guillermo Chacon, LCOA vice president, in a statement. "We need to reach every segment of our communities in rural and urban areas. We call for a commitment at all levels in confronting stigma associated with HIV/AIDS."

Other items discussed in the report include: improving access to care in Puerto Rico; developing programs that include faith-based Spanish-speaking groups; focusing on prevention efforts for young Latino gay men; and addressing stigma for gay and straight men and women.

The report cited three specific issues of concern: transnational HIV infection; late HIV testing; and HIV in Latino men who have sex with men (MSM).

Mexicans and Central Americans who migrate to the United States for work are considered at high risk for getting HIV, but the report challenges the assumption that they bring HIV with them ("AIDS on the Border" in the July/August 2008 issue of POZ magazine explores this issue).

People who are diagnosed with AIDS less than a year after they first test HIV positive are defined as late testers. Forty-two percent of Latino people in 2006 who tested HIV positive turned out to be late testers, which is a higher rate than any other ethnic or racial group. The report advocates making HIV testing routine.

Latino MSM are about 44 percent of all Latino AIDS cases, as reported in 2007 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The report urges the creation of "culturally competent programming" to reach Latino MSM.

To read the complete report, click here.

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