Talk of the Town

Rebooting Iowa's Siouxland AIDS Coalition.

March 20, 2013 By Trent Straube

When Elisabeth Giles would offer HIV tests to younger folks at the Siouxland Community Health Center in Iowa, she'd often hear, "That's not still around is it?" Alarmed by the lack of awareness, Giles, an HIV social worker, joined with colleagues from Planned Parenthood and the district health department to rejuvenate the defunct Siouxland AIDS Coalition.

"Although we are rural," Giles says, "we are an industrial city in a tri-state that has a wide demographic berth"—including a large African refugee population. Most of the new diagnoses are among young minority men who have sex with men.

"People are not having conversations here about [sexually transmitted infections] and HIV health before they're hooking up," Giles says, adding that people don't want to get tested because they think it means something's wrong with them.

To change that, the coalition helped youths put on skits about stigma; they held an HIV-themed fun run; and they made a local panel for the AIDS Memorial Quilt. They even got the mayor to attended their World AIDS Day events—which grabbed headlines.

But personal dialogue is also key. "I wear my enamel lapel pin," Giles says, "so people can say, 'Is that for HIV?'" It's a simple gesture, she says, that can build awareness and reduce stigma.

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