The Viral Lowdown: Lack of Leadership Leaves Latinos In Lethal Lurch

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So it was the year of the Latino, right? If you're a bilingual pop star, you grabbed Grammys and platinum record sales. But even though the rate of new HIV infections among Latinos is four times that of whites, Ricky Martin's ass-shaking got mucho más ink than the fact that Latino groups are reported AWOL on AIDS.

"It's been hard to put a Latino face on AIDS," said Dennis deLeon, head of New York City's Latino Commission on AIDS. "There's a feeling that 'somebody else' is taking care of it."

Blacks made up more than half of all infections last year; Latinos, one fifth. But lacking a Magic Johnson-sized PWA -- or such leaders as Rev. Jesse Jackson -- many advocates wonder how bad it has to get before it gets better. "The emphasis has been on the African-American experience, which is huge and terrible," deLeon said. "Many of the same barriers that stalled black AIDS action are at work here but there are others unique to us, too."

One is the language divide; another, differing risk factors. According to deLeon, Mexican-American men who have sex with men are more likely to be at risk, while among Puerto Ricans, IV-drug users are. "There's no one way to address so many different heritages, and risk factors," he said.

Rich in clashing cultures, Latinos have never been politically cohesive, and there's no single equivalent to the NAACP. "Latinos need to step up," said Angel Nuñez of Florida's Farmwork Coordinating Council, which does prevention among rural Latinos. "I go out to the fields in my jeans and sneakers, and people listen to me." And advocates from, say, the National Minority AIDS Council should spend more time outside the Beltway, added Nuñez.

Black awareness' recipe may have to be translated into Latino: a 1998 study found that 90 percent of Latinos saw AIDS as a major threat. Even Carlos Santana might have something to say. Is anyone asking?

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