In Oakland, AIDS Is Everyone's Business

A new public-private partnership aims to end a state of emergency in California.

September 10, 2010 By Cristina Gonzalez

Across San Francisco Bay sits Oakland, home to the highest and most rapidly growing rates of HIV incidence in the United States. Ten years after local officials first declared the city to be in a state of emergency over its rising HIV rates, Oakland remains torn apart by a seemingly unstoppable epidemic.

Oakland Mayor Ronald Dellums's office responded to the raging rate of new HIV infections by founding Get Screened Oakland (GSO), a new public-private partnership that involves for-profit corporations, city programs and nonprofit organizations to revolutionize HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention programs in order to drastically lower HIV rates in Oakland—and beyond.

GSO is supported by the Global Business Coalition (GBC) on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Since 1998, Alameda County has been fighting a rapidly increasing rate of diagnosed and undiagnosed HIV cases. Oakland, the county's largest city, has accounted for the highest number of cases within the county for more than 10 years. The city alone accounts for 65 percent of Alameda County's HIV/AIDS cases, and its infection rate is seven times higher than other cities in the county.

"It's estimated that one in three Californians living with HIV/AIDS is in the Bay area," said Marsha Martin, PhD, director of GSO and former special assistant on HIV/AIDS policy to Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala. "And in spite of the passage of time, increased knowledge about the spread of HIV and improved methods of both testing and treatment, Oakland remains in a state of emergency."

GSO has three goals: raise awareness about the HIV epidemic, reduce HIV transmission and make HIV screening a routine part of care, Martin said. The hope is that GSO's prevention strategy will serve as a national model and revolutionize public health programs in other cities ravaged by HIV/AIDS.

Dellums invited citizens, corporate partners and AIDS service organizations (ASOs) to work

together toward these goals.

“He acknowledged the government cannot do it alone,” Martin said. “The private sector, community partners and citizens need to actively [participate] in bringing about the solutions.”

To help bring in private partners, Oakland reached out to GBC. The GBC connects the knowledge and expertise of corporations with the government agencies, municipalities and nonprofits where they can do the most good.

John Newsome, vice president of the GBC and head of its U.S. HIV/AIDS Initiative, said his group was drawn to the Oakland project for several reasons: There was a very pressing need; the GSO leadership was committed to addressing the issue; and the project presented an opportunity to include GBC members tied to the Oakland area—including Chevron, Levi Strauss & Co., Young & Rubicam, Walgreens and the NBA.

Each of those corporations offered a specific skill set that could benefit GSO. For example, Young & Rubicam, experts in social marketing, could develop a tailor–made campaign to raise HIV/AIDS awareness.

“[GSO] is the first campaign of its kind to include public, private and community participation,” said Miguel Bustos, the senior program manager for the Americas for the Levi Strauss Foundation. “Participating companies are able to leverage the power of Mayor Dellums’ office with the resources of private businesses to reach out to the community. You can’t get any more collaborative than that.”

In turn, the corporations benefit from working within their communities and with their employees. Most of these private partners have a long history of good corporate citizenship and socially responsible community engagement, specifically in the arena of HIV/AIDS. Chevron, for example, was headquartered in San Francisco and has been a leader in HIV awareness and condom distribution programs since the 1980s.

“We view this as an extension of what we already do in communities where we operate,” said David McMurry, manager of global public health and special projects at Chevron. “And Oakland is in our own backyard.”

Walgreens’ involvement with GBC and GSO began after an employee who was an active volunteer urged the company to become a partner. It is exactly this synergy that could make GSO a national example, GBC’s Newsome explained.

“These partnerships and others like it are redefining what it means for the government and the community to work together,” Newsome said. “This is on the one hand an opportunity supported by the biggest national companies and on the other still a collaborative, grassroots effort.”

Levi Strauss & Co., which has promoted HIV/AIDS awareness and education since 1982, will

contribute to GSO with annual grant support. The company got involved in HIV/AIDS awareness in 1982 when a group of employees in its San Francisco office started distributing educational materials to coworkers.

GSO focuses on ASOs, clinics and hospitals where staff can help the agencies develop programs for community support and HIV prevention, testing, care and treatment. They also develop local initiatives such as AIDS awareness days and health fairs.

GBC corporations work with GSO in whatever ways their specific skill sets can contribute to the process. “There are people all over the country doing notable work, but it is rarely as cost-effective,” Newsome said. “Few organizations can work like this and benefit from in-kind support and genuine expertise.”

“It’s unique because GBC doesn’t ask for funding,” McMurry said. “They ask for specific expertise—it’s leveraging each companies specialties to make it a partnership and not just a philanthropy.”

These programs can then be documented, scaled and replicated in other cities, with each program tailored for a city and its corporations.

GSO also approaches HIV/AIDS in a unique way. “It begins to tackle what is at the core of this disease: stigma and discrimination,” Bustos said. “Issues and elements of homophobia, sexism, classism, elitism and racism exist in our society, and Get Screened Oakland acknowledges these obstacles and is working hard to break them down.”

Another important element of the GSO/GBC partnership is that it breathes new life into the project. “This approach re-energizes and re-engages an exhausted community of providers by bringing in new people and new partners,” Martin said. “With more people engaged, HIV becomes everyone’s business. With more people engaged, the work is better coordinated, facilitated and supported.”

Given that people continue to contract HIV and that not all of them know their status or get connected to care, it could be argued that many U.S. cities would benefit from a new approach to fighting HIV/AIDS. As Martin points out, countless urban areas nationwide are facing budget cuts and shrinking resources while the HIV epidemic is “at best, at a plateau.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2008 that the number of new infections in the United States is 40 percent higher than had previously been reported, and as Newsome pointed out, the rate of new infections has been holding steady. “The only way to win the fight,” he added, “is to find new ways of working together that draw on far more resources and expertise.”

And unlike many other programs, this partnership seems to be working.

“GSO deserves national attention because it works,” Bustos said. “Last year, the Alameda County

Office of AIDS Administration reported a 20 percent increase in HIV testing as a result of the GSO HIV testing initiative."

With the highest elected officials in cities putting HIV/AIDS awareness on their agendas, Martin said, more people will get involved, get tested and get connected to care—and thereby lower new infections.

"Since when is it accepted to let people who have an infectious disease just live with it until they get sick? We have the resources to treat everyone today," Martin said. "We will not have the resources 10 years from now. We must act today."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/get-screened-oakland-19080-1252