HIV and Syphilis Cluster Reported in Milwaukee by Health Advocates

At least 125 people are included, but the city health department has not yet notified the public.

March 8, 2018 By Trent Straube

At least 125 people in Milwaukee have tested positive for HIV, syphilis or both, health care advocates tell the Journal Sentinel. But the city health department has yet to make an announcement about the cluster to the general public.

In this context, a cluster refers to a collection of infections closely grouped in time and place; in terms of HIV, the viruses could be genetically similar.

Most of the people in the Milwaukee cluster are men, and 45 percent of the group tested positive for HIV. The cluster also includes students from the public schools—though they made up less than 10 percent of the cases—and three babies were born with syphilis last year, reports the newspaper.

Mayor Tom Barrett met with health commissioner Bevan Baker about the cluster of sexually transmitted infections in December and again in January, a week before Baker resigned because of a lead-poisoning scandal in which families of thousands of children were not notified that the children tested positive for lead.

The city health department did notify the public schools, however, that the city was seeing an increase in sexually transmitted infections among people ages 15 to 24, and it has launched a campaign to raise awareness of STI testing.

Melissa Ugland, a public health consultant who works with local health-related nonprofits, tells the newspaper that the cluster is considered ongoing and that health officials are trying to contact those who tested positive.

Health officials have labeled the cluster a sentinel health event. The term refers to a preventable disease or disability or untimely death whose occurrence serves as a warning signal that the quality of preventive and/or therapeutic medical care may need to be . Common examples include falls and medication errors.

A previous POZ newsfeed item about HIV clusters in Texas noted that the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention describes a cluster as “a group of HIV-infected persons (diagnosed and undiagnosed) who have a direct or indirect epidemiological connection related to HIV transmission. Transmission clusters can represent recent and ongoing HIV transmission in a population, where public health interventions could improve care outcomes and prevent new infections.…

“A transmission cluster represents a subset of an underlying risk network. A risk network includes the group of persons among which HIV transmission has occurred and could be ongoing. This network includes persons who are not HIV-infected but may be at risk for infection, as well as the HIV-infected persons of the transmission clusters. Transmission clusters present opportunities for improvement of HIV health outcomes and prevention of new infections in the larger underlying risk network.”

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