Inspiring Faith-Based HIV Prevention [VIDEO]

Black and Muslim community leaders unite to promote testing awareness in Harlem.

July 8, 2009 By Kat Noel

Bridging the efforts of faith-based and community-based organizations in the fight against HIV/AIDS, the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood in partnership with Harlem United Community AIDS Center (HUCAC) and the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS (NBLCA) hosted an HIV testing event and health fair on June 26 in anticipation of National HIV Testing Day, which is June 27.

After delivering an HIV-focused sermon on Jumu'ah, the Muslim day of worship, spiritual leader Imam Al-Hajj Talib Abdur-Rashid led congregants of the Islamic Brotherhood outside the mosque to HIV mobile units that were provided by Harlem United Testing Services Department. "I'm not just here to lead in prayer; I'm here to lead in that which is good for us, and I believe that being tested is good for us," said Imam Talib, who volunteered to be tested publicly.

Congregants of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood in Harlem wait for an HIV test.
Photo courtesy: Deborah Levine

According to data from the New York City HIV/AIDS Annual Surveillance Statistics regarding people who were tested in 2007 and lived in the metropolitan area, 50 percent of African Americans and 30 percent of Hispanics were diagnosed with HIV, compared with 17 percent of whites. Carolyn St. Hilaire, program director of community organizing and outreach for HUCAC, believes that a collective response from community-based and faith-based organizations is necessary in order to raise awareness and "strengthen the infrastructure that's available for residents living with HIV and who are affected by HIV."

"The two have not traditionally been joined, but through Uptown Health Link's partnership with the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS and through the relationship with the mosque, we're now able to highlight the importance of faith-based communities in the fight against HIV," St. Hilaire said.

Deborah Levine, vice president of community development for NBLCA, recognizes the assumption

that faith-based communities originally had no interest in combating the epidemic, but she points out that “resources have not really followed faith communities so that they can learn and build their own curriculum around how to begin to address this issue.”

Levine says that the interest is there, and she emphasizes that when working with any group, including faith-based organizations, it is important to be culturally competent and respectful in order to reach a collective goal.

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