Glad it’s NLAAD (National Latino AIDS Awareness Day)

October 15, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

Today, October 15, 2010, we turn our attention to the HIV/AIDS pandemic among Latinos in America. The nation’s quickest growing sub-population is becoming infected, and progressing to AIDS, at a disproportionately high rate. This must stop now.

Though Latino men and women comprise 16% of the U.S. population, they represent 18% of all Americans living with HIV and 17% of all new HIV diagnoses in the U.S. Latinos are about three times more likely to contract HIV than whites. In 2008, 1 in 5 Americans under the age of 18 was Latino. Given that 30% of all new HIV diagnoses in America occur in people under the age of 29, Latino youth are at particularly high risk for HIV infection.

Between 1996 and 2005 nearly 50 percent of Latinos with an HIV diagnosis progressed to AIDS within three years. As Dr. Kevin Fenton, Director of the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD and TB Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said, “The lifetime risk of being diagnosed with HIV among Latinos is 1 in 36 for males and 1 in 106 for females. Clearly, this risk is unacceptable. We cannot allow HIV to gain more ground in the nation’s fastest growing minority population.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the reasons that Latino people are disproportionately affected by HIV include: poverty, migration, stigma and the challenges of adapting to the U.S. culture. We also know incarceration, lack of access to quality health care, homelessness, discrimination, racism, language barriers and navigating the immigration system contribute to the problem. The bad news? There are many difficult-to-address social issues fueling America’s ever-burgeoning HIV epidemic, particularly among Latinos. The good news? It is finally becoming clear that to stop AIDS, we must successfully confront those issues. We will also need to address aspects of life like: public transportation, childcare, education/literacy, mental health and sexual and domestic violence.

We know that Latinos are being unfairly hard hit by HIV/AIDS. We know why. We are hearing pledges from the heads of various government agencies to change what is happening. (I was happy to see Dr. Tony Fauci, Director, National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health, phrase the opening sentence of his statement thus: “On the eight annual National Latino AIDS Awareness Day, we extend our compassion…” thus bringing some humanity to the horror of the stats). We have a National HIV/AIDS Strategy and an implementation

plan for that strategy that can result in the changes that are needed.

But we should remember that though we've come a long way in terms of testing and treating people for HIV in America, there are still more than 600,000 Americans living with HIV who are not in care (and that 350,000 of the are aware of their HIV status and still don't seek care). The issues that we will need to confront and change for the bulk of those 600,000 people to be willing to come forward to seek care are things that will benefit society as a whole. Reducing poverty, homelessness, hunger, illiteracy, violence, etc. will not only stop AIDS dead in its tracks, it will along strengthen the core of our nation. (And perhaps, create jobs!)

Let's find, train and support an army of grassroots outreach workers skilled in addressing the aforementioned challenges! How about motorcades of mobile testing units rolling into these hardest hit areas? A sea of translators? Crowds of counselors? Oogles of outreach workers to speak directly to people who need it most? Experts at immigration law? People skilled in helping people transition from being in jail or prison to being members of society again? The leadership of the HIV community on the ground, in the flesh, in these neighborhoods?

There is currently a study - ISIS, The Women's HIV Seroincidence Study - funded by the NIAID that is "exploring how to deliver urgently needed HIV prevention and treatment services to women who live in largely minority neighborhoods in inner cities and who are at high risk for HIV infection." I think it's great that we're studying how to best help so we are most effective and efficient in our outreach, but given how long disproportionate Latino HIV infection has been a problem, we need answers and action muy rapido!

This year at POZ, we went beyond the usual business of marking NLAAD with statements of intent. We reached out to Latino Americans, partnering with Tibotec to produce a special supplement for today's Miami Herald. It ran in both their English language version of the newspaper and El Nuevo Herald, their Spanish language version. The supplement links readers to local testing sites and all the resources they need to get the information and support to explore whether they are living with HIV and if so, to get into care and treatment if they choose. I wish we could run this supplement in every city where Latinos are hit hard by HIV, directing them to specific places in their backyards where they can seek help. And I wish the distribution of a supplement like this, designed to reach those not already in care and connected to the HIV community, would be supported on the ground by AIDS service organization outreach programs, local and state departments of health and community-based organizations.

I'd love to hear your thoughts on what we can do, as a community, to better support our Latino brothers and sisters. How can we encourage them to get tested for HIV and to connect to care and support? If we were to run this supplement in other cities, what programmatic support should we look to build? Do you work with an ASO or an organization that serves the Latino community? Then please share your insights so we can integrate it into our ongoing efforts at POZ to better distribute information to people who desperately need it.

We have the commitment of our public health leaders and our government. It's high time to put

into practice what we know needs to be done.

And so, on this day, rather than just reflect where we are, let’s also aggressively identify what steps can be taken asap to change the equation so that on the occasion of next year’s ninth annual NLAAD, we can all report a significant change for the better.

I send my best wishes and support to all of you out there in the field working tirelessly to try to change what’s happening with HIV in the Latino community. Share your stories with us here by posting comments and we will help ensure that your insights get shared with people who are planning further help and services for Latino Americans!

And please read our special supplement (below) and send it to anyone you know who may be at risk.

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