

North Side agency pushes for HIV/AIDS testing

by Shamontiel Vaughn
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Pedestrians may not notice Better Existence With HIV, an HIV/AIDS prevention and testing center located inside of Bethany Lutheran Church, 1244 W. Thorndale.

Minus a sign on the door, a passerby won't know about the people sitting in a waiting room where large glass containers full of various condoms (female condoms, male condoms, polyurethane vamsish sheets for safe oral sex, flavored condoms, and lubricants) greet them in colors resembling a box of crayons. BEHIV patients are invited to take as much protection as they want and are taken downstairs, to the basement of the building where there is a comfy couch and different contraception and handouts about sexually transmitted diseases on the table, to be tested. Test takers fill out a confidential form of their sexual past history and then wait to be called. When called, patients have a confidential and intimate conversation about their past, take the Oraquick Rapid Advance Test, and within 20 minutes, know their status.

A positive result sets a team of BEHIV workers in motion. The client is then "linked to a primary care facility to test the client for viral load, retest to confirm HIV status, upon confirmation linked to a case manager, and the case manager assists with their social needs," Ariq Cabbler, prevention manager at the North Side center, explained.

"It's so overwhelming when you find out your status because there are so many mixed signals that go through one's brain because it's still categorized as a terminal disease—chronic terminal but manageable," said Greg Sanchez, an HIV-positive Education Outreach Prevention Specialist at BEHIV. He was diagnosed as HIV positive when he was 19 years old and has lived with the disease for 23 years.

"It does scare people...The initial thing is how do you tell your parents or your church members or friends or date. If you're working, how will my employees find out? Will this affect my insurance? There are so many different responses and reactions to that."

But Sanchez, like other BEHIV workers, is concerned about the number of minority men who refuse to be



BEHIV workers, from left, include Ariq Cabbler, Victoria Thomas, Cassandra Smith and Greg Sanchez. *Defender/Shamontiel Vaughn*

tested. He attributes the hesitation to cultural experiences and expectations.

"It took me five years to come to grips with it. I was in denial...I think it's really hard for Blacks and Hispanics because we have things in our cultures—church, spirituality, religion, and you're dealing with this disease that has so many stereotypes and stigmas attached to it," Sanchez said.

Gender roles and biases also come into play, he explained.

"Men, on the other hand...there's this social expectation in the Black community and the Hispanic community and in the community overall that men are supposed to be a certain way, and that's to be strong and not to take care of our physical health. And you're a wimp if you do this, or you're gay if you ask that question. The pressure that we have as a culture with poverty, immigration, language barriers, different social statuses within a culture, you're dealing with a lot. There's a lot of hierarchies and a lot of dos and don'ts in our culture. HIV is hitting our cultures badly because we've been in denial about it so long."

Still, BEHIV strongly encourages being tested.

"As men, we have to step up by encouraging our women to be tested," said Cabbler. "Encouraging our sons to be tested. If we're fathers, and we have a homosexual son, we have to make sure he's tested. African Americans tend to think of HIV with only the gay person."

with free HIV testing," said Cabbler. "It's a matter of letting the community know that they have access to that technology. We need to be able to access it, not be afraid of our results, because you can't hide from HIV."

You can pretend you don't have it. You can refuse to know your status. But the only thing you're doing is delaying the inevitable."

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