



## **Stories From the Field**

### **Gay and Lesbian Community Center of South Florida**

On June 2, 2009, OraSure Technologies sat down to speak with Jorge Gardela of the Gay and Lesbian Community Center of South Florida about the organization's HIV testing program.

#### **About Jorge Gardela**

Jorge Gardela is the Health and Community Services Manager at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center of South Florida (GLCCSF or the Center). He has served in this position for the past six years. Mr. Gardela chairs the Broward County HIV/AIDS Hispanic Committee, a coalition of agencies and volunteers that coordinate HIV prevention initiatives and provide leadership within the Latino community of Broward County.

Mr. Gardella is also the HIV/AIDS Minority Network Liaison (for Area 10 of Broward County) with the Florida Department of Health, a coalition concentrating on reducing racial/ethnic HIV/AIDS disparities by coordinating activities to reduce new HIV infections, increase HIV testing, and linking individuals with care.

#### **Can you please tell us about your organization?**

The GLCCSF is the only community center fully dedicated to serving the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community in Broward County. For fifteen years, we have served our community and provided programs, services and a safe gathering place of comfort and confidentiality. The GLCCSF's mission is to serve the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community and provide information, education, advocacy, support, human services, cultural experiences and social opportunities. The Center works to foster personal development and quality of life for the entire community.

As stated in our mission, "We embrace individuality and diversity and work together to promote awareness, acceptance, celebration, and pride." The GLCCSF's vision "is to be the premier point of connection for our community."



### **Can you tell us about the HIV testing that you are doing at your facility?**

The GLCCSF's Counseling, Testing, and Referral (CTR) Program has been an important part of the overall strategy to fight HIV/AIDS in South Florida. The findings from the 2008 Florida Health Department client satisfaction survey on HIV counseling, testing, and linkage services show that GLCCSF clients expressed high levels of satisfaction with the services they received. We are grateful to all of our counselors who continue to make GLCCSF's testing program one of the best in the state.

The CTR Program provides the following services:

- Readily accessible counseling, testing and referral services for individuals at risk for HIV
- Rapid testing at no cost to individuals who would not otherwise be able to afford testing
- Client-centered counseling designed to reduce client risk of acquiring or transmitting HIV
- Appropriate referrals for medical or psychological evaluation and social support

In 2008, the CTR Program performed 2,891 HIV antibody rapid tests. Almost 3% of those tested positive for HIV infection. So far in 2009, we have tested more than 1,400 people.

### **Why did you incorporate rapid testing into your practices? And how you are doing it?**

In 2005, we significantly increased the availability of HIV testing for men who have sex with men (MSM's) based upon CDC guidelines and the CDC MMWR publication (June 2005) indicating that more South Florida MSM's were unaware of their status than in most other urban locations. Then, in 2006, we incorporated rapid testing to make the HIV testing process easier and more accessible, and to address high levels of MSM who were seeking HIV testing. The need to provide rapid testing technology also arose from consumer expectations and feedback.

From 2006 until now, the number of MSM who received testing for HIV at the GLCCSF has increased 400%. The Center is one of the largest rapid testing sites in Broward County.



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### **Can you tell us about the importance of oral fluid vs. blood testing for HIV?**

Many people are scared of needles and blood - this presents a huge challenge when providing an HIV test. The OraQuick *ADVANCE*® test, which uses oral fluid, is more attractive for customers, because it does not cause pain and there is no contact with blood. Additionally, our staff feels more confident administering the OraQuick *ADVANCE*® test, reducing their stress and giving them the opportunity to concentrate on encouraging positive behaviors and practices to prevent transmission of HIV.

### **Can you comment on customer comfort level and ease of testing with OraQuick *ADVANCE*®?**

Most of the people tested feel very confident with oral fluid; it is a surprise to them how quick and easy the test actually is.

For people who test positive reactive, learning their status early also gives them the power to stop the chain of infection while they are waiting for the confirmatory. People sometimes tell me, "I could deal with it if I'm infected, but I couldn't live with myself if I infected someone else." My response is, "If you learn that you are positive, you can take steps to protect the people you care about."

Rapid testing also gives HIV-negative people the power to stay free of the virus. For those whose behavior places them at risk, our brief counseling sessions are important opportunities to get their attention. I tell them, "When you leave here, you need to have a clear, realistic plan of how you will stay negative." I acknowledge that behavioral change is difficult and takes time, especially in the areas of sex and drugs. I also tell them, "I believe they have the power to make positive changes in their lives." We work together to create a plan that will help them avoid the pain of a positive test result.

### **Can you tell us about the advantages of the OraQuick *ADVANCE*® Rapid HIV-1/2 Antibody Test?**

Because of its simplicity and accuracy, it is the best tool in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Results are available in 20 to 40 minutes while clients wait. This is a less stressful, more convenient way to learn one's HIV status.