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Latino group: Educate & test

BY JAY MWAAMBA

WITH AN eye on correcting more HIV edu- cation and testing, activists, community groups and leaders in New York City and around the country marked the 30th anniversary of National Latino AIDS Awareness Day (NLAAD).

"We need to come together to increase HIV testing and AIDS awareness. We must encourage everyone to get tested. HIV does not discriminate," Guillermo Chacon, president of the Latino Commis- sion on AIDS, said on the steps of City Hall at the Oct. 11 event.

NLAAD's theme for this year, "His- paniors United to End AIDS," integrates efforts to raise HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention of HIV testing, as well as prevention and education in the quest for an AIDS-free generation.

The annual event is observed on Oct. 11, the last day of Hispanic Heritage Month, across the U.S. On Saturday, Dec. 1, the commission will mark World AIDS Day with an interdenominational Latino AIDS memorial service at St. Si- mon Buidh Parish, 18th St. and Valen- tine Ave. in the Bronx, starting at 11:30 a.m. For information, call (718) 367-5251.

Dueling to the crisis remains a decade later — 36,001 Hispanics were living with HIV/AIDS through 2010, according to the city Health Department — Chacon pointed to NLAAD's role in fighting the disease through testing, education and combating stigma.

"Unfortunately, Hispanics are still se- verely impacted," he said.

"They are 27 percent of the New York popula- tion, yet make up 33 percent of all cases diagnosed.

There were 1,776 new diagnoses — new cases in the city — reported in the Latino community in 2010.

Only blacks, with 1,661 new cases di- agnosed and 49,530 people living with HIV/AIDS, have higher rates.

"Blacks and Latinos are first and sec- ond in infections," Chacon said. "And if you look at the data, the female face of new HIV cases in New York City is heavy- ly black and Latino."
AFRICAN-AMERICAN & LATINO SPECIAL AIDS AWARENESS

NEW RX FOR HOPE

'Game-changing' once-daily prevention pill Truvada's 75% effective

BY JAY MWAEMBA

SOME 31 YEARS into the epidemic, there may finally be a major breakthrough in the fight against AIDS—a once-daily prevention pill approved by the Federal Drug Agency in July to protect those most at risk of contracting HIV, the virus that causes the disease.

The excitement is understandable. Developed by California-based Gilead Sciences, Truvada is the first and only drug shown to slow HIV infection—and is up to 75% effective.

"It's a game-changer," said Sonya Mallick, senior director of Policy and New Business at Harlem United's HIV/AIDS organization. "It’s like a seismic shift.

Janet Weinberg, chief operating officer of Gay Men's Health Crisis, applauded the FDA's decision and said it would clear the way to making the drug available to all at high risk of contracting HIV.

It was originally introduced in 2004 as a treatment for those with HIV-1, and was prescribed as part of a drug cocktail to repress the virus. However, in 2007, government researchers proved that it could actually prevent HIV infection.

A three-year study by the National Institutes of Health found that daily doses cut the risk of infection in healthy gay and bisexual men by 42%, when accompanied by condoms and counseling.

Last year, another study found that when safer sex practices were followed, the drug reduced infection by 75% in heterosexual couples when one partner had HIV and the other did not.

Truvada works by asking the body why the virus never takes hold in the body. Mallick said her group is eager to exploit the drug in a decades-long fight against HIV. Harlem United, one of the city's largest HIV/AIDS community-based organizations, with a $44 million budget and 13,317 clients served last year, it's in the local epicenter of the AIDS crisis.

The possibilities of the HIV prevention pill are bringing together "HIV stakeholders from across the city," said Dr. Jeanine Cockroft-Murray, chief medical officer at Harlem United.

"It's not just about prescribing the pill and sending (clients) off on their way. You have to set up a program. You need regular HIV counseling and testing, and because the pill has side effects, you need to monitor the kidney."

According to the manufacturer, the drug costs $1,195 a month in the U.S., which has remained steady at 50,000 annually, with pay and non-paying patients accounting for nearly two-thirds of the cases.

In total, an estimated 1.2 million Americans have HIV, and an estimated 240,000 are believed to get to know they have HIV.

**By the numbers:**

**HIV/AIDS in N.Y.**

APPROXIMATELY 1,173 New Yorkers were living with HIV/AIDS at last count, according to the city Health Department. But only in Dec. 31, 2010, a year in which 3,483 New Yorkers were diagnosed with HIV.

Of those, 2,664 were male and 823 were female. That brought the number of males living with HIV/AIDS in the city to 78,863 and the number of females to 38,973.

The Health Department reports that blacks are the fastest hit, with 49,530 cases; Hispanics living with AIDS numbered 36,023, and 22,656 whites were documented. The balance were Asian/Pacific Islanders (1,808), Native Americans (255), bisexual (50) and unknown (415).

AIDS claimed the lives of 1,995 New Yorkers in 2010, bringing the cumulative total after 30 years of the epidemic to 107,013.

New York has the nation's largest population of men who have sex with men, and the highest-risk group living with HIV/AIDS and new infections.

**Quick OTC home HIV test**

**By JARED MCCALLISTER**

SINCE JULY, the war against HIV/AIDS has been fought on a new front with OraQuick — the over-the-counter, FDA-approved home rapid-result HIV test kit available.

"Every one of our stores is carrying the product," said Greg Petrow, senior manager of HIV and Hepatitis at Walgreens, the nation's leading drug store chain.

The kits, by the makers of OraSure, are on the shelves in the U.S. Conference on AIDS that was held in Las Vegas, he said, adding that "awareness of the product was a big topic of discussion at the conference."

Price, from OraQuick Technologies, is also available at CVS, Rite Aid and Walmart — and online at OraQuick.com.

"One out of every five individuals with HIV are unaware they have HIV. And this particular test provides another option, an additional option," said Ron Paco, senior vice president of corporate communications of OraQuick Technologies.

OraQuick was approved by the FDA in July.

Nathan, Pa.-based OraSure is the leading supplier of oral fluid collection devices.

"This test is the same test that healthcare professionals have been using to test patients," he said.

And then when the test was approved for use with a saliva sample back in 2004 by the FDA, we began having some discussion with the FDA about what it might take to get this same test and make it available over the counter."

"That was about seven years ago. It's been a long time coming, but it's also the first [home] test that can deliver a rapid result."

Customers aren’t left alone after OraQuick after getting their test results.

The company provides access to a well-trained telephone support staff — available 24 hours, 7 days a week, 365 days a year — to provide individuals with information about HIV and AIDS; how to use the test kit and perhaps most importantly, what to do after they get their results and need information or referrals.

"One size does not fit all, but being able to test in the privacy of one's home has been shown to be an effective tool in the fight to identify more patients who are infected with HIV, said Dr. Victoria Petit, director of the Center for Comprehensive Care at St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital.

For information, visit oraqueck.com.