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Refocusing the fight against AIDS

By Jennifer Brown
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They want condoms for school kids and prisoners, public money for needle-exchange programs, health care for everyone with HIV and prevention campaigns that aren't anti-sex.

After a decade-long lull, AIDS activists are reviving their fight.

This time, they're pushing for a science-based plan from the Obama administration targeting a disease that still kills more than 14,000 Americans each year.

Gay and lesbian activists from across the country are mobilizing in Denver this week at their annual Creating Change conference. The event marks a return to the fierce fight against AIDS and follows recent data showing that 56,000 Americans become infected with HIV each year — a 40 percent increase from what was previously estimated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The focus is back on HIV after political issues — mainly same-sex marriage and discrimination protection — have preoccupied the gay community the past several years.

"People will have a hard time choosing marriage if they are sick and dying," said Sue Hyde, director of the conference, which is sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "AIDS and HIV have never lost their grip."

Also, medical advances that changed an HIV diagnosis from a death sentence to a manageable condition have left a younger generation without a sense of urgency, activists said.

Many young people — who aren't old enough to remember when gay men were "dropping like flies" in the 1980s — have grown complacent, said Marjorie Hill, chief executive of Gay Men's Health Crisis.

Major advances in drug treatments are allowing people infected with HIV to live for 15 years and longer. The downside: Hill knows young men who say, "I can do one pill a day, right? That's like a vitamin, right?"

"For better or worse, fear does in fact influence behavior. But so does knowledge," she said. "People are still dying, but at a much slower rate."

Nearly 5,200 Coloradans have died of AIDS since 1985 and 10,644 people are living here with HIV or AIDS, according to the state health department. AIDS deaths peaked nationally in 1995 at 48,371.

National strategy

Conference leaders want the 2,000 or so gay and lesbian activists expected in Denver this weekend to start lobbying federal policymakers to create a national AIDS game plan. They want an AIDS strategist in the White House reporting directly to President Barack Obama, who talked during his campaign about making the disease a higher national priority.

"Twenty-seven years into this epidemic, the United States does not have a coordinated plan," Hill said.

Science must drive the plan, she said.

Ideas from the Gay Men's Health Crisis include "true condom availability" in schools and prisons, federal spending on needle-exchange programs to stop the spread of HIV among drug-users, and ads that show gay men and women being affectionate — that say safe sex "is a healthy part of the adult experience."

Minorities affected

Also, activists say the nation should target spending to fight the disease among minorities.

Of the 56,000 Americans who become infected with HIV each year, almost half are black, according to CDC data released in August. Only a little more than 12 percent of the nation's population is black in no combination with other races.

"It's dramatically impacting people of color at a disproportionate rate," said David Munar, vice president for policy and communications at the AIDS Foundation of Chicago.

The disparity is due to poverty, less education, diminished access to health care and substance abuse in minority communities, experts said.

"It has not gone away"

The new CDC figures "confirmed the worst fears" of AIDS activists and have served as a rallying cry to revive efforts, Munar said. Focus on AIDS diminished in the 1990s, and public consciousness framed the disease as an issue for sub-Saharan Africa.

"There is a new sense of optimism that the new president and Congress will act on these data and refocus attention nationally on the epidemic at home," he said. "It has not gone away."

Conference leaders plan to spend a large part of the event hammering away at the stigma and shame still attached to the disease.

Munar, who has been living with HIV for 14 years, said he was so "petrified" after his diagnosis he delayed getting health care.

"It was paralyzing in terms of who to talk to and what to do about it," he said. "I was in a mental cell. I just could not confront it, but it was ever-present."

Munar found out he had the virus while he was enrolled in a behavioral study for gay men without the disease. When a blood test came back positive, he was in "complete denial" and retested four times.

"It was incredibly traumatic," he said.

The stigma often keeps people from getting treatment and from telling family, friends and even doctors they have the disease, Hill said. And misinformation about how it spreads is still rampant.

Hill said a woman at her hair salon asked her just a few weeks ago whether it was true that people with B-positive blood are immune to HIV.

"This a woman business-owner in New York City in 2008!" she said. "This anti-gay, anti-sex, anti-women-expressing themselves really keeps people from getting the information they need necessary to save their lives."

Hill and Munar will be part of a Saturday panel discussion on AIDS at the conference.