

NUMBER OF HIV POSITIVE PEOPLE IN COUNTY LIKELY UNDER ESTIMATED

Funding For More Testing Sites Proposed



BY TROY MAY

The HIV infection rate in Santa Clara County could be three times higher than reported and public health officials have

a proposal to discover the real number of people in the county who are living with HIV.

People often want to get an anonymous HIV test because of the perceived stigma associated with the disease. Santa Clara has one free anonymous testing site near

downtown San Jose in a county with 1.7 million people, compared with 40 sites in San Francisco with less than half the population.

The lack of access to free anonymous HIV testing could mean a lot of people in the county are not getting tested. As of last year, there were about 1,000 people in the county who tested positive for HIV, but that number could be three times higher, public officials estimate.

County supervisor James Beall has proposed to allocate \$375,000 in one-time funds for the 2007 budget to establish aggressive HIV testing and counseling services for at-risk populations. Supervisor Blanca Alvarado also supports the funding.

"The HIV pandemic continues to spread throughout the world and Santa Clara County is no exception," said Mr. Beall in a report to the Health & Hospital Committee.

The funding would add four new testing sites that are strategically located in areas with populations at high risk of infection. An unlimited number of free OraQuick tests kits would be provided to the sites from the State Office of AIDS. These kits provide results in less than 30 minutes.

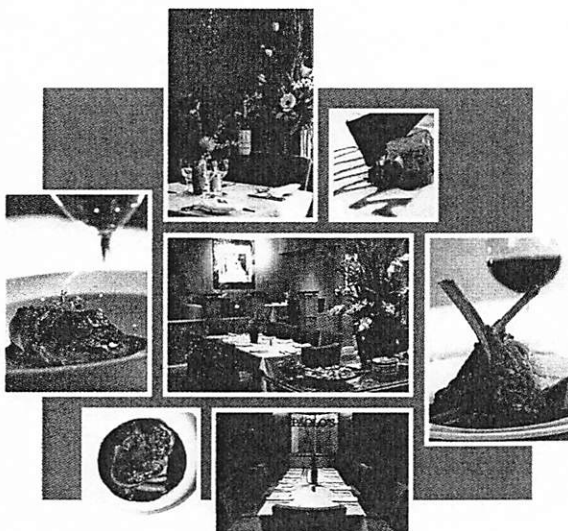
"Even though this previously fatal disease has evolved into a manageable chronic condition when caught in its early stages, there is new evidence that it is more widespread in Santa Clara County than ever before," according to the report.

The county report suggest as more people continue to live with HIV due to excellent drug treatments, "epidemiologists confirm that the growing population of vectors



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of transmission (people living with HIV) will substantially increase the incidence of transmission throughout the county population."

Over the years, there has been a less strong of a voice and funding in the community for HIV/AIDS causes. In 2003, AIDS Resources and Information Services, a nonprofit agency, went bankrupt. Then the economic downturn during the last five years has forced the county to cut \$150,000 from HIV/AIDS programs.

"When ARIS went bankrupt a few years ago, it left a gap. We lost a powerful advocate in

the community," said Clark Williams, a San Jose activist who lost his partner to AIDS.

The knowledge of one's HIV status can provide several benefits. People who are HIV positive can get treatment that will help keep them healthy, and the virus under control.

"When people know they are infected with HIV they often change their sexual behavior, and start having protected sex," says Williams. "That's why I think it is important to support HIV testing and counseling."

The proposed funding comes at a time when the county is at risk of losing federal dollars

from the Ryan White Care Act, a federal program for HIV/AIDS services. As of January 2007, the funding allocation formula will be based on HIV case data rather than AIDS case data.

The change in formula could result in a reduction of 40 percent of more than \$3 million in Ryan White funds for the county each year. "Santa Clara County has not accumulated the HIV case data to substantiate this continued level of funding, even though it is estimated that thousands of county residents are living with HIV and that the majority of them are unaware of their infection," the report concludes.

The Crane Center at 976 Lenzen Avenue in San Jose is the only site in the county that offers a free anonymous HIV test. But the center is only open during regular business hours, closed evenings and weekends. As a result, it's assumed the center isn't reaching the target groups and less than 2 percent of those tested at the center are positive.

In February, the public health department started to offer HIV testing one evening per week at the Billy DeFrank LGBT Community Center because 80 percent of the infection rate is still in gay men. Since the program started, 4 percent of those tested were positive, twice that at the Crane Center.

Many residents at high risk of HIV infection such as gay, bisexual, Latino men and their partners, substance abusers and sexually active people are often unaware where to go for a test.

"The testing services need to reach out into the vulnerable populations and 'chase the disease' rather than wait for people to come through county clinic doors," Beall said.

The county funds would be used for the department of health to conduct HIV testing and counseling at locations where the most vulnerable people are accessible. The best way to reach the target population is to allow community based organizations to conduct the tests throughout the county.

The proposal goes to the full board for a vote in June. **ON**