

# HIV rate climbing

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25 years from a white homosexual male to a black heterosexual woman. Statistics have revealed that with startling numbers.

While a recent report by the Centers for Disease Control show that HIV infections among African-Americans have decreased about 5 percent a year for the past three years, numbers are still along epidemic proportions, affecting African-American females disproportionately. The report shows:

Black women accounted for 68 percent of new HIV infections between 2001 and 2004;

Among young women aged 13 to 24, African-Americans accounted for 68 percent of all infections through 2001;

Among 13- to 19-year-old girls, the black share of infections through 2001 climbed to 78 percent;

78 percent of Black female infections between 2001 and 2004 were through sex with men.

AIDS is the leading cause of death for black women 25-34.

The rate of AIDS diagnosed for all African-Americans in 2004 was almost 10 times the rate for whites and almost three times the rate for Latinos.

As of the end of last year, 200,000 African-Americans had died from AIDS over the past 25 years, equivalent to an entire mid-size city.

While contracting AIDS no longer brings the automatic death sentence it did when the disease first broke out into the public eye in 1980, extreme serious social, financial and psychological consequences remain for its victims, families and the communities they represent. Unless critically reduced, AIDS stands to cause serious cracks into the structure of the healthy African-American family on all levels.

In Dallas, there are individuals and organizations that have declared war on AIDS, fighting the spread of the disease with campaigns of accurate information, a number of social services and perhaps most important of all – non-judging and unconditional love.

"We work with those statistics every day," said Cheryl Edwards, founder of A Sister's Gift, Dallas' only outreach organization devoted solely to meeting the needs of women with HIV/AIDS. Speaking on a Dallas radio show, Edwards said that women of color – both African-American and Hispanic – now make up 74 percent of all AIDS cases.

"That person with AIDS could be your church member, friend or co-worker," Edwards said. "But they live anonymously, a lot of times rejected by their parents and family"

The driving force for Edwards founding A Sister's Gift was watching her brother and close confidant, Ronald Lewis, die from AIDS in 1995. She vowed to assist AIDS victims as a gift – a sister's gift – to her dying brother. Edwards' organization offers a long list of services for HIV/AIDS-positive females at a confidential location.

"Most of our clients are unable to work," Edwards explained. "They're in moderate to poor health. A large amount of them have small children at home."

Desiree testified on the invaluable assistance A Sister's Gift has given her, not only providing financial support, but also one-on-one counseling, mentoring and seminars.

"They've helped me at a time of desperate need," Desiree said. "They remind me that I'm still a human being who has needs. There are times when I will fall too, but there's someone there to pick me up."

Such emotional provisions have proven to be just as important as anything tangible for infected black females or anybody who suffers through the strong stigma that still exists in many circles. Goldenberg could attest to that, speaking of interactions with her twin sister, especially when she lived in her house.

"(When I ate) at her house, she threw that dish away," Goldenberg recalled. "There were no words to help her know that she was not going to get AIDS. I lived upstairs; she would not come up for a year and a half."

When men expressed an interest in Desiree, she told them up front of her condition.

"They either think that I'm just so desperate to have somebody, because I'm positive, I'll accept anything from any male that just wants me for sex," Desiree said.

Desiree considers A Sister's Gift a godsend just as Goldenberg does of AIDS Services of Dallas, which provides housing, meals and transportation for people with HIV/AIDS. Goldenberg lives in a three-bedroom unit inside an apartment complex owned by ASD, paying nominal rent based on her income. It has given her enough support to raise her two teenage grandchildren, whom she took in 12 years ago.

Edwards, based on her experiences of counseling and giving assistance to more than 200 female HIV/AIDS clients over the past two years, continues to hear horror stories about black female victims not attaining even the simplest of funding for their needs. She says that major AIDS assistance funding is still going in the old direction from a quarter of a century ago



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