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reaching the **INVISIBLE POPULATION**

Local AIDS group reaches out to Appalachian men at risk for HIV

Compiled by Rodney Tucker and Matt Comer

Tucker have been leading new outreach efforts in a bid to reduce HIV infection rates among Northwest North Carolina's gay and bisexual men.

Photo Credit: Roger Plaster

HICKORY — The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that men having sex with men (MSM) account for just four percent of the U.S. male population aged 13 and older, yet the rate of new HIV diagnoses among MSM is more than 44 times that of other men and more than 40 times that of women. In the rural Appalachian Mountains and foothills of Northwestern North Carolina, a few additional statistics caught the attention of local AIDS service organization, the AIDS Leadership Foothills-area Alliance (ALFA). In 2010, a shocking 90 percent of new clients came into medical care with an AIDS diagnosis and almost 70 percent of the clients self-identified their risk factor as men who have sex with men.

"We just couldn't stand around waiting for people to come to us for testing. We had to develop proactive tools and strategies to provide targeted testing, build trust and market our services," said Rodney Tucker, ALFA's executive director. "While the rest of the country seemed to be moving past gay white men and targeting African-American women as at-risk populations, we realized that our region was trending 10 years behind the national curve with new infections. I was shocked to see the statistics with 40-year-old men self-identifying as having sex with other men coming into care with an AIDS diagnosis."

Outreach begins

ALFA knew they had to begin better and more strategic outreach to MSM communities. Approaching the situation blindly wasn't an option. Step one in the group's outreach plans was to interview MSM and find out where and how they were meeting other men for sex. With a push from Michelle Hudgens, a local disease intervention specialist with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, ALFA hosted their first MSM Taskforce meeting in one of nine rural counties in February 2011.

"Oh, if we could only go back in time and try this one again" said David Zealy, ALFA director of education, with a smile. "We did everything wrong. We tried the straight-up honest approach with our community and called it exactly what it was and who we wanted to attend. We used local gay social groups and even the newspaper to advertise the meeting. Five people showed up — five scared people."

All wasn't lost. ALFA learned a great deal from the encounter. Online hookups were a normal way for men to meet other men for sex and some MSM were engaging in sex in public parks, gyms and rest areas. The men's choices for sexual encounters were limited by their life experiences; many weren't "out" to friends or family and a lack of gay nightclubs

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