

Feb. 24, 2009

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MEDIA NOTE: The health department and other community based organizations that are part of the HIV/AIDS Network of Southwest Florida (HANS) will offer a free conference and free HIV testing as part of the local observance of National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. A schedule of those offerings is at the end of this release.

A Call to Action: Reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS on women

HIV infection and AIDS continues to take a toll on women with thousands becoming infected each year. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), over half of all new HIV infections occur among black women --- mothers, daughters, sisters, wives-- between the ages of 19 to 35. Some women are unaware of their male partner's risk factors for HIV infection, such as having unprotected sex with multiple partners, having sex with men or injecting drug users. Men who engage in sex with both men and women can acquire HIV from a male partner and then spread the virus to their female partners.

The Sarasota County Health Department and other organizations that are part of the HIV/AIDS Network of Southwest Florida (HANS), urge women of all ages to take advantage of opportunities for free education and HIV testing during March. These will be at various locations throughout the county as part of the National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day observance on from March 10-14.

Sisters and Latinas will gather at a conference event to unite against HIV/AIDS on Saturday, March 14 from 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Newtown Estates Park/Center, 2800 Newtown Boulevard in Sarasota. The day's events are designed to empower and mobilize women of color where they live, work, play and worship to become more educated about HIV/AIDS. There will be several speakers, including a call to action, "Sisters Organizing to Survive." Lunch will be provided at no cost through a grant from Gilead Science, Inc. There will also be door prize drawings, health screenings and hands on health information from local community agencies in both Sarasota and Manatee Counties. Pre-registration is required as space is limited. Call Serena Miller at Comprehensive Care Clinic, 941-366-0461 before Monday, March 9 to reserve seating. Members of the HANS received funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health to sponsor this conference.

The theme for National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day is "HIV is Right Here at Home – Get Tested. Know Your Status." HIV tests take only a few minutes. You can get results in a few days to two weeks. Rapid HIV tests allow you to get preliminary results in about 20 minutes. Public health officials say that women have the power to reduce the spread of HIV. **Be safe:** abstain from sex. If you have sex, use a new latex condom every time. **Talk about it:** talk about sex and HIV with your partners. Find out when they were last tested and about their HIV status. Be clear that you will be having safer sex or none at all. **Talk with your doctor:** if you have sex, ask your doctor for an HIV test. **Spread the word:** Set an example by getting tested and spreading the word that others should do the same.

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“As women, we are so often the caregivers of our families and friends and we forget to take care of ourselves. Yet it is so important to take time to get medical care, especially if you are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. Knowing your HIV status can help you get into medical treatment earlier. It can also help you take steps to stay healthy, and keep from spreading the virus to others. Test results are always kept private and are not shared with anyone, including family members, significant others, employers or landlords,” said Dr. Lisa Merritt, executive director of the Multicultural Institute which developed the Gatekeepers of Community Health Project in Sarasota and Manatee Counties.

The Sarasota County Health Department staff can assist those who test positive in getting access to health care and treatment. “We hope women will take the time to get tested,” said Joan Surso, HIV/AIDS health educator and registered nurse with the county health department.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that HIV testing be a routine part of medical care. In 2006, Sarasota County Health Department and HANS sponsored a workshop to assist local health care providers in conducting HIV screening with their patients. Health officials say that pregnant women are screened for HIV infection during their initial prenatal care visit and again at 28 to 32 weeks gestation. However, women who do not receive adequate prenatal care may miss that opportunity for HIV screening and testing.

Locally, the HIV/AIDS Network of Southwest Florida works to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS at the “grass roots community” level. The group meets monthly to coordinate HIV/AIDS prevention and outreach services throughout Sarasota County. National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day is intended to promote prevention efforts focused on education and empowerment in the fight against HIV/AIDS. For more information on those HIV testing opportunities call 941-861-2900 or visit the HANS website www.hiv Sarasota.org. Free locally-sponsored HIV testing opportunities are listed below:

HIV/AIDS Network of Southwest Florida 2009 Sarasota County Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day activities March 10-14, 2009

Free Walk-In HIV Testing using OraSure HIV Test

Tuesday, March 10; 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Sarasota County Health and Human Services Center (health department)

2200 Ringling Boulevard, Sarasota 34237

Contact: Gary Ervin. For more information, call 941-861-2919

Sponsoring Agency: Sarasota County Health Department

Free Rapid HIV Testing – Preliminary test results available in 20 minutes

Tuesday, March 10; 9:30 a.m. to Noon

Rialto Goodwill Center

650 S. Tamiami Trail, Venice 34285

Sponsor: Sarasota County Health Department

Contact: Sarasota County Call Center, 941-861-5000

Free Rapid HIV Testing – Preliminary test results available in 20 minutes

Tuesday, March 10; 1 – 3 p.m.

Habitat for Humanity Retail Store

1400 Ogden Road, Venice 34285

Sponsor: Sarasota County Health Department

Contact: Sarasota County Call Center, 941-861-5000

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HIV/AIDS Network of Southwest Florida

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Free HIV Testing and Screening

Tuesday, March 10; 3 to 5 p.m.

ALSO Out Youth

1470 Boulevard of the Arts, Sarasota 34236

Contact: Stephen Warne, 941-951-2576

Sponsoring Agency: ALSO Out Youth

Free HIV Testing and Screening

Tuesday, March 10; 3 to 7 p.m.

Planned Parenthood of Southwest and Central Florida

736 Central Ave., Sarasota 34236

Contact: Marilyn Anderson 941-365-3913

Sponsoring Agency: Planned Parenthood of Southwest and Central Florida

Free Rapid HIV Testing – Preliminary test results available in 20 minutes

Wednesday, March 11; 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Wal-Mart Super Center

17000 Tamiami Trail, North Port 34287

Sponsor: Sarasota County Health Department

Contact: Sarasota County Call Center, 941-861-5000

Free HIV Testing and Screening

Wednesday, March 11; 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Genesis Health Services

2223 N. Washington Blvd. (U.S. Highway 301), Sarasota 34234

Contact: Dr. Lisa Merritt

Sponsoring Agency: Genesis Health Services and the Multi-cultural Health Institute

Free Rapid HIV Testing – Preliminary test results available in 20 minutes

Thursday, March 12; 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Salvation Army

1400 Tenth St., Sarasota 34236

Sponsor: Sarasota County Health Department – Health In Motion Mobile Medical Unit

Contact: Sarasota County Call Center, 941-861-5000

Free Conference: “Sisters and Latinas Uniting Against HIV/AIDS”

Also HIV Testing and Screening

Saturday, March 14; 10 :30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Newtown Estates Park/Community Center - 2800 Newtown Blvd., Sarasota 34234

Lunch will be provided through a grant from Gilead Sciences, Inc.

Sponsors: John Snow, Inc. and the HIV/AIDS Network of Southwest Florida (HANS)

Pre-registration is required as space is limited

Contact: For more information or to RSVP, call Serena Miller at 941-366-0461

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