

Public Health Education Challenges in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS

Communications and prevention remain critical in the fight against HIV/AIDS despite dramatic improvements since the virus appeared in the United States more than three decades ago. In the early 1990s, AIDS was the number one cause of death for Americans age 25 to 44, and many people viewed contracting the HIV virus as a virtual death sentence. Since then, antiretroviral therapy and other treatments have enabled HIV-positive people to lead long productive lives.

But treatment advances have also engendered complacency that further complicates already politicized public education, and research shows the disease becoming less visible. A 2011 Kaiser Family Foundation poll found only 40 percent of Americans have seen, heard, or read “a lot” or “some” about HIV/AIDS in the U.S. in the past year.

“What health communicators do, ultimately, is translate—turning HIV science and research into messaging, materials and resources that inform, educate, and resonate with multiple audiences to motivate action and change behavior”

— *Alicia Eberl-Lefko, Project Director AIR’s Act Against AIDS Project*

With no cure for the disease and some communities in its thrall, public education is vital. Strengthening HIV testing, care, and prevention is key to reducing transmission and improving HIV treatment efficacy. Recent research shows that people in treatment are significantly less likely to sexually transmit the virus but half of Americans diagnosed with HIV still aren’t getting regular healthcare.

Renewed public health education efforts will be critical to fulfill the Obama administration’s call for an “AIDS free generation.” More resources are also needed to tackle long-held misperceptions and to increase testing rates that haven’t budged since 1997, even for at-risk groups.

Key Facts

In 2009, over 48,000 Americans became newly infected with HIV.



1.2 million Americans have HIV, but **almost 20 percent** don’t know they are infected.



Only 7 percent, down from 68 percent in 1987, named HIV/AIDS America’s most urgent health problem.



More than a third of African-Americans and Hispanics say they want more information about HIV testing.

Everyone is at risk but certain groups have been especially hard hit.



Men who have sex with men (MSM) represent roughly 2 percent of the U.S. population, but accounted for more than **61 percent** of all new HIV infections.



African-American men are six times more likely to be infected with HIV than white men.

Sources: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), Act Against AIDS

Resources

- **AIR “Ask the Expert” video** on using HIV/AIDS communications to build awareness: www.air.org
- **Act Against AIDS (AAA)** is a five-year national campaign to fight complacency about HIV and AIDS in the U.S.: www.actagainstaids.org
- **HIV/AIDS At 30: A Public Opinion Perspective:** www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/8186.cfm
- **Kaiser Family Foundation video:** AIDS at 30: The U.S. Epidemic: www.kff.org/hivaids/062111vid.cfm