



Combating AIDS Through Community Empowerment

Although Latinos make up 13% of the U.S. population, they account for 20% of all new HIV cases (CDC 2000). As the Latino population grows in numbers, so does the rate of new HIV infections. The HIV virus impacts all of the distinctive ethnic groups that make up the Latino population. Therefore, HIV prevention groups must be tailored to the specific needs of the Latinos in the program, be they Mexican, Colombian, Dominican, Puerto Rican, or members of any of the other Hispanic ethnic groups (CDC 2000).

The Centers for Disease Control has budgeted several million dollars to create HIV prevention programs that target Latinos. The CDC provides funds for local community programs through the state health departments (CDC 2000). These programs bring HIV prevention to a more personal level because active community leaders organize the best prevention programs for their individual communities (CDC 2000). The CDC monitors the success of community programs through local and state health departments (CDC 2000).

Community empowerment seems to be the most effective way to reach Latinos when discussing HIV prevention programs. By giving authority to Latino community leaders, individuals will learn from people who not only understand their background and culture, but who also are trustworthy, admired, and respectful of other community members. Local people have potential to be much more effective in communicating with Latinos than strangers who do not have as much influence in the community. Furthermore, community planning can target the problems specific to that particular community. For example, if drug use is the primary mode of HIV transmission, then community programs can focus on

substance abuse prevention; however, if male-male sexual intercourse is more prevalent, a community program can work with homosexual and bisexual men. Establishing more community programs is the most effective way to promote HIV prevention among Latinos because it actively involves community members and targets problems specific to a particular community.

Latino Teenagers and the AIDS Epidemic

Since the first reports of HIV in the early 1980's, the virus has spread rapidly throughout the world. In the United States, Latinos comprise 20% of new HIV cases (CDC 2000). Rates of HIV infection in the Latino community have grown tremendously since the onset of the epidemic. Latinos of various ethnic groups, economic backgrounds, and ages have all been effected by the spread of HIV. The numbers of Latino teenagers ages 13 to 19 years who have HIV continue to grow, particularly young girls.

From the beginning of the AIDS epidemic through June of 1998, Latino youth between the ages of 13 and 19 years have accounted for 176 (5%) of the 3,851 adolescent HIV cases (National Pediatric and Family HIV Resource Center 1999). Latina girls accounted for 55% of these new cases while young men made up 45% (NPHRC 1999). Cumulative AIDS cases among 13 to 19 year olds through June 1998 number 3,302 (NPHRC 1999). Hispanics accounted for 647 of these cases; Latinas made up 33% of these cases while Latino males comprised 67% (NPHRC 1999).

From the beginning of the AIDS epidemic through June of 1998, 8,250 youth ages 15 through 24 years have died from AIDS (NPHRC 1999). Latino youth have accounted for 21% of these deaths (NPHRC 1999). Rates of HIV infection among Latino teens continue to increase. Furthermore, the trend of Latino males becoming infected at higher rates than females is beginning to reverse itself; indeed, from the early 1980's until 1998, slightly over half of the new reported HIV cases among Hispanics were by females (NPHRC 1999). Teenagers are

the future of the Latino community; however, HIV threatens this future as more Latino youth become infected with the virus. We must make greater efforts to teach Latino youth the best HIV prevention methods in order to ensure a healthy and happy future not only for the Latino community, but also for the entire nation.