



## Metro Teen AIDS Pairs Education with Ambition

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Thursday, 15 May 2008

HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention remains a primary health concern for residents of the District. The D.C. metropolitan area ranks first in the number of reported AIDS cases in the nation.

Metro TeenAIDS (MTA) is an organization at the forefront of HIV/AIDS education and prevention in the District. The nonprofit organization has traditionally targeted students in grades seven through 12. However, this year MTA adjusted its approach, reaching out to high school sophomores in D.C. Public Schools.

“Our goal is to reach every 10th grader in D.C. Public Schools. We’re on our way there—we’re actually getting there!” said Saba Tsegaye, school services manager at MTA.

She continued by saying the organization has been in every single District of Columbia Public School this year.

The organization’s approach to confronting HIV/AIDS in the District is to raise awareness at a young age, enabling teens to develop their own understanding of what HIV/AIDS is, isn’t and how to get tested for it.

Lamar Anderson, Youth Center Coordinator at MTA, also plays a role in that process.

“I started out in a 10-month apprenticeship program with Public Allies. From then, I realized from doing that internship with Metro Teen Aids that HIV and AIDS is affecting a large amount of my community members, and that kind of put a strain on my heart,” Anderson said. He has worked with MTA’s Youth Center for five and a half years.

Tsegaye majored in public health at the University of Maryland and has worked with MTA for two years.

Tsegaye said she was drawn to working in AIDS education and prevention because of her local ties to the area and the apparent need for additional AIDS awareness and education efforts in the District.

“I enjoy working with youth, I like seeing youth that don’t have as much confidence, seeing them develop confidence and develop skills to take on the world,” she said.

Anderson said in the past years, sexual education in public school has not been sufficient in confronting sexual health and HIV/AIDS awareness issues, but is hopeful for the coming school year.

While reaching into each D.C. Public School, MTA has implemented a curriculum in schools called Making Proud Choices, an eight to 10-week program where teens build confidence and negotiation skills while learning

about HIV/AIDS and sexual health.

Since school is set to end for summer break, the Youth Center plans on upping its hours and services offered. The center will open two hours earlier than usual, at 2 p.m., when school is not in session and will offer summer enrichment programs at no cost to teens interested in participating.

Although the organization works with youth throughout the D.C. area, Tsegaye noted that some areas appear to show a greater need for HIV/AIDS awareness than others.

“A lot of our efforts are focused in Wards 5, 6, 7 and 8. We’ve seen that those are some of the higher need areas,” she said.

The neighborhoods included in the mentioned wards fall primarily into the Northeast and Southeast quadrants of the District.

Anderson said most of the teens that use the Youth Center come from the neighborhood surrounding MTA’s office on Pennsylvania Ave. S.E. near the Eastern Market metro stop.

Despite conditions of poverty in the areas MTA works in, Tsegaye said a before and after survey administered to program participants shows an improvement in the general level of understanding regarding HIV/AIDS as well as changes in behavior after completion of the program.

Despite the positive aspects of the work MTA does with area youth, setbacks do exist for both the organization and the teens participating.

The associated social stigma paired with HIV/AIDS is the primary challenge the organization has had to confront through their work. The stigma has presented itself not only in those looking for information on HIV/AIDS, but also in those working to educate others on the issue.

“We actually had a young woman that worked here and was HIV positive for four years and she recently passed away. But she was HIV positive for four years and because of her stigma she didn’t tell anyone,” Tsegaye said, adding that the staff at MTA took the news with surprise considering the nature of their work.

The young woman worked with MTA as a peer educator and is well remembered with a large photo poster on the office wall-complete with staff signatures and short statements. Tsegaye added that the deceased worker’s family still does not believe that she died of AIDS today, despite the access to information on the virus.

Anderson said parents and family members have to be ready to confront uncomfortable topics like HIV/AIDS and sexual health to defeat the possibility of infection.

“I guess one thing, the main thing, I would say is be open and honest with your kids. A lot of parents want to assume that their kids are not being sexually active, assume that their kids are not even entertaining these thoughts,” Anderson said.

He continued, “They need to be open and honest and willing to discuss those issues with their kids because it is happening in the world, and you’d rather be prepared than unprepared.”