

Sally Lehrman: Spiral of invisibility hides the continuing peril of AIDS in Silicon Valley

By Sally Lehrman

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If you've been paying attention to the news, you know about the distressing spread of the AIDS pandemic throughout Africa and Asia. You may be aware of advances in medications, or even heard about the clinical trial in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Uganda that shut down because a preventive gel didn't work.

You might think that there's little to worry about here in Silicon Valley. Sadly, that's far from the truth.

Yes, HIV diagnoses have remained stable for about 10 years in Santa Clara County. Many people who live with AIDS and have good jobs and health benefits blend right in with everyone else. Nevertheless, the Bay Area, including this county, remains one of the U.S. regions hardest-hit. The impact on African-American and Latino communities is especially severe.

One of the biggest reasons for the virus' success is our refusal to look at AIDS right here, right in the eye. We can't blame pleasure-seekers in Los Angeles or San Francisco for bringing it home. "No, it's homegrown," said Jim McPherson, the STD and HIV Prevention and Control Program Manager for Santa Clara County. "This is our own homegrown, continuing epidemic. If we want to stop this, we have to stop this in our own neighborhoods."

The problem is the silence.

"We're not talking about it in our schools, we're not talking about it in church, we're not talking about it in social situations," said Cynthia Carey-Grant, executive director of Women Organized to Respond to Life-Threatening Diseases. Despite 30 years in our midst, AIDS still carries a deep stigma.

Oakland-based WORLD was formed 20 years ago to support and advocate for women with HIV/AIDS. Today, many women continue to assume they are not at risk, and perhaps more dangerously, their doctors assume the same.

"I was denied testing twice before I tested positive," said Naina Khanna, WORLD policy director. Her answers about sexual activity and drug use didn't fit the at-risk profile. Many of WORLD's clients are African-Americans, Latinas and Asians, older mothers and grandmothers who were tested for HIV as much as a decade after being infected. "You've had the same doctor for years, you're just not on their list of who should be talked to about HIV," Carey-Grant explained.

Anthony Trazo, HIV program manager for San Jose-based Asian Americans for Community Involvement, challenges community beliefs that it is shameful to discuss sexuality. "It's easier to fall into high-risk behavior when it's a hidden thing," he said. Asian/Pacific Islanders are consistently the least-tested for HIV in the county. As testing has improved over the past few years, diagnoses have risen as well.

In Silicon Valley, AIDS claims two distinct populations, said Fred Ferrer, chief executive of The Health Trust. There are those who have plenty of support, and those who are unseen. Many of the latter are homeless or addicted to drugs and have exhausted all their resources. Many are in our own families and communities, yet we choose not to see them. Some don't see themselves as at risk.

Black, brown or white, this spiral of silence and invisibility hurts us all. We add to the isolation of those who are sick, perhaps prompting them to spurn their doctors and medications to avoid being found out. We make it harder to get tested, adding to the spread of infection. To fully address AIDS around the world, it's time we stop averting our eyes.

Let's be real: Our communities have HIV. We've got to talk.

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