

# HIV & AIDS vigil promotes testing

Emily Clemons, Senior Staff Writer 9:31 a.m. EST December 10, 2015



(Photo: Brandon Buck/FSView)

Tuesday, December 1 was World AIDS Day, a day set aside to fight the HIV/AIDS diseases, show support for those living with the disease and honor those who have died. The following day, the FSU College of Medicine hosted the First Annual HIV & Aids Awareness Candlelight Vigil, specifically to reduce the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and encourage people to know their status.

“It is very important that we try to reduce the stigma that’s associated with HIV and AIDS, because that’s the thing that’s preventing people from seeking the care and services they need,” said Eric Walker, a first-year medical student and the Community Service Chair for the Student National Medical Association.

Those services, many of which were provided or showcased at the vigil, range from preventative services to care and management, as well as support groups.

Rapid HIV testing and Syphilis testing were both offered at the College of Medicine from 2 to 6 p.m. that day.

These services and tests are particularly important for the Tallahassee community; Florida has the second highest HIV/AIDS numbers in the nation, behind only California, with 54,000 new cases diagnosed in Florida every year.

According to Walker, the Big Bend area has particularly high HIV/AIDS numbers, and new cases of HIV/AIDS even pop up frequently on Florida State’s campus—almost weekly.

But we are far from alone: 35 million people are affected by HIV/AIDS worldwide, with 2.6 million new cases every year.

“The problem with this disease is that it’s nondiscriminatory,” said Dr. Antonio J. Carrion, Assistant Professor of Pharmacy Practice in the COPPS at FAMU and a pharmacist at Bond Community Health Center. “It does not care about your color, your creed, your race, your ethnic background, your gender, or how old you are. It’s like a bullet – it attacks whatever it hits.”

In fact, the demographic of the AIDS crisis has changed. While the virus may have taken hold the United States’ attention through its LGBT+ community, today is disproportionately affects people of color.

Dr. Carrion’s own aunt is living with HIV, and while he says that HIV/AIDS is no longer a death sentence, it still is a chronic problem.

There are many things that keep those living with HIV/AIDS from seeking proper medical treatment, including the stigma associated with the disease and the exorbitant cost.

“Most people don’t want to go see my colleagues... because they’re afraid of what people might say,” Dr. Carrion said.

HIV/AIDS medication, according to Dr. Carrion, costs about \$2,000 a month. Even if you have health insurance, a twenty percent copay out of \$2,000 is still a hefty price.

Dr. Carrion believes that much more can be done to help solve the AIDS crisis, and it begins in communities like ours.

“I challenged FAMU saying ‘We need to do more.’ You need to do more. FSU needs to do more. Tallahassee needs to do more. Florida needs to do more. The U.S. needs to do more, and so on and so forth – down to the ants on the ground all the way up to the heavens. Everyone can do more. And it starts with education.”

The HIV/AIDS virus cannot be spread through physical contact such as a handshake or a hug, and yet these old myths still exist.

People living with HIV/AIDS also need to know how to take proper care of themselves, and this includes knowing what care they need and where to find it.

Dr. Carrion believes that with these educational measures, along with frequent HIV/AIDS testing, we can stop the disease in its tracks – just like polio and smallpox.

“That’s the charge I’m going to give you all: If you haven’t gotten tested, go get tested. And next time, bring a friend. And then tell your friend to bring a friend. And then continue that process... This should manifest into the entire Tallahassee community.”

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