

Good Day To Face The Facts On HIV

Mobile Clinic Brings Test Initiative to NE

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She looked nervous.

The young woman in the floral print shirt clicked her long, fake nails together. She held out one hand tentatively, offering up a finger to be pricked for a test that could change her life forever.

Then she exited the room and sank into a seat in one of two Unity Healthcare mobile clinics parked at H and Eighth streets NE. It would be 20 long minutes before the results of her HIV test were ready.

The community organization's trucks were offering free HIV and hepatitis screenings yesterday as part of the 11th annual National HIV Testing Day.

Dozens of Washington area clinics, churches and schools participated.

Last year, Unity Healthcare screened about 75 people for National HIV Testing Day, and this time, the group tested 103 people and hoped to distribute information to 1,000 more.

More than 1 million people nationwide are infected with HIV, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The District has the highest per capita HIV infection rate of any major U.S. city, according to a 2001 study cited by the D.C. Department of Health.

Tammy Stewart was one of 13 Americorps volunteers who hit the streets east of Union Station to direct pedestrians to the Unity Healthcare trucks. Organizers said they chose H Street NE because it has heavy pedestrian traffic and is near the border of Wards 5 and 6, both of which have high HIV rates.

"You have to be where people are, you know. It doesn't make much of a difference to be up in a building when people on the street need information," Stewart said while handing out condoms and brochures.

As she grabbed some condoms for a passerby, he reached into the pockets of his cargo pants and pulled out a handful; he had already run into other volunteers earlier. "It's encouraging to see people are willing to take protection," Stewart said. She stopped to point out the testing site to a teenage girl.

At one of the trucks, meanwhile, nurse practitioner Janice Williams and medical assistant Samuel Giron tested a steady stream of people.

They worked smoothly and quickly together: Williams asked about risk behaviors and described the test; Giron pricked people's fingers with a lancet and dissolved the blood into a developing solution that wicked up the OraQuick test strip to reveal the results. One pink control line: HIV-negative. The control line and another pink test line: HIV-



Brandon Armani, right, director for special populations, is on duty outside one of Unity Healthcare's mobile units. (Photos By Michael Robinson-chavez -- The Washington Post)

positive. A social worker was ready to counsel people who tested positive and refer them for treatment.

A 19-year-old who had intended for a while to find out her HIV status decided to get tested when she saw the trucks. A man in his thirties who had practiced unsafe sex stopped in for a test.

A middle-aged man who used intravenous drugs seven years ago came, too, hoping to put his worries to rest. "You know, people don't go get their HIV tests, 'cause they [are] scared of the result, but this van -- that's a good thing," he said, adding that it was easier and more accessible than most clinics.

"Don't drive off without my results," he said as he left the testing room.

Williams and Giron also drew blood for hepatitis A, B, and C testing. Hepatitis C requires long, expensive and sometimes ineffective treatment and infects about 4 million people in the United States, many of whom will develop liver disease that can be fatal, according to the CDC.

As with HIV, the District's infection rate for hepatitis C is among the nation's highest, and the African American and Latino communities suffer disproportionately, said Brandon Armani, director of special populations for Unity Healthcare. And many people with HIV also have hepatitis C, a particularly lethal combination because "once the liver cannot function, your HIV medication will be useless," Armani said.

People outside the truck ate cupcakes as they waited to be tested or to pick up results. After 20 minutes, the woman with the floral print shirt headed back into the room to find out her HIV status. Williams told her the results and then began explaining when she might want to consider returning for another test.

But the woman was only half-listening. The only thing important to her at the moment was her test result.

HIV-negative.