

Desert AIDS Project aims to spur all to get an HIV test

Written by Victoria Pelham The Desert Sun

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David Brinkman is CEO of the Desert AIDS Project and a member of The Desert Sun editorial board. / Courtesy

HIV/AIDS stats in the Coachella Valley

HIV/AIDS living prevalence rate per 100,000 population: 226.5 in eastern Riverside County
Prevalence in valley: 67 percent higher than national rate
Never been tested for HIV: 66.9 percent of Coachella Valley adults (nearly 230,000 people)
Source:Data from Get Tested Coachella Valley, Health Assessment Resource Center, Riverside County Department of Public Health

Get Tested

The Coachella Valley coalition for Get Tested includes the AIDS Assistance Program, Clinton Health Matters Initiative, Desert Healthcare District, six valley cities, regional hospitals, various Riverside County agencies, LGBT Center of the Desert, UC Riverside School of Medicine, among others.**For more information:**
gettestedcoachellavalley.org • In Spanish: haztelapruebavalledecoachella.org

Local HIV and AIDS advocates say that when they've mentioned the Coachella Valley to national health experts in the past, the well-known — and extremely high — rate of HIV infection concerns them. "What is going on down there?" they ask.

The prevalence of infection in the valley is 67 percent higher than the national average, according to data from the Health Assessment Resource Center. But about two-thirds of residents have never been tested for the virus.

"That means just living here in the valley puts you at greater risk of HIV infection," said David Brinkman, CEO of Desert AIDS Project in Palm Springs.

A massive three-year, \$5 million initiative spearheaded by the Desert AIDS Project and in partnership with 50 valleywide organizations that will be announced Thursday will focus on testing.

Get Tested Coachella Valley, also known as Hazte la Prueba Valle de Coachella in Spanish, will work to virtually eliminate the risk of HIV and AIDS for valley residents by getting an unprecedented amount of people tested and then linked to care, project leaders said. Once diagnosed, studies have shown that risk-causing behavior changes dramatically and — once the virus is fully managed through HIV medication — an HIV patient can become 96 percent uninfected.

"People will get behind the wheel of their car after drinking; people will eat a Big Mac and big fries and they have cardio-vascular disease; and people in the heat of passion will have sex without condoms no matter how many times you give them the condom," Brinkman said.

"So the idea of living in a valley and eventually a nation and a world that is no longer infectious because our world and our nation is on HIV medication is the science behind wiping out new infections."

A key part to the campaign will be a focus on making HIV testing a standard part of medical practice at all of the region's hospitals, private doctor's offices and federally qualified health centers, with signs on the doors of practices showing that they're GTCV locations. When a patient goes in for routine blood work to be tested for diabetes, high cholesterol or other conditions, voluntary HIV testing will be added to the list.

"It just makes common sense in this day and age," said Susan Unger, Get Tested's project director.

"It's saying the Coachella Valley, if we all step up — as people already are — really has the potential to perhaps be the first region in the United States to... bring an end to the HIV epidemic, a very audacious goal," Unger said.

Making the tests routine without having to answer questions about sexual activity and without making it based on any particular demographic will help to reduce the HIV-related stigma that often blocks people from getting tested or wanting to disclose their status, project leaders said.

It will also allow doctors to not pick and choose who to test. Unger said doctors will sometimes come in and see a 42-year-old married woman with kids and assume she doesn't need an HIV test.

"Well, you can't tell," she said. "It could be anybody. Virus does not discriminate."

To bring in high-risk groups, including Latinos and some in the LGBT community that make up a large part of the valley's population and those who live in poverty, Get Tested Coachella Valley will reach out specifically to them. They will work closely with local clinics and firms who have experience with the different groups and visit many community events.

The campaign will also use a mobile testing unit to do rapid testing on-site at these events and locations throughout the valley. People will be able to use a Q-Tip style device to swab their upper and lower gums — and then find out within 20 minutes whether they are infected or not.

"It's very simple to do in any kind of setting whether it's an art fair, a rock concert or a migrant farmworker canning shack," Unger said.

Get Tested Coachella Valley will operate on a test-and-treat model, making sure that those who test positive — whether in Indio or Indian Wells — are brought into care right away, Brinkman said. If they are insured, they will be linked to a specialist; if they are uninsured and can't afford health care, there will be other pathways set up.

The Desert AIDS Project board of directors has committed to treating everyone, and the Affordable Care Act requires HIV testing to be covered under insurance plans.

This test-and-treat approach will include the creation of a new Linkage to Care Network. Upon diagnosis, clinical providers can call a phone number provided by the campaign, so patients can speak with early interventionists, trained counselors for HIV, rather than requiring doctors unfamiliar with HIV and AIDS care to handle a positive test.

The Get Tested initiative will also help to raise awareness and educate the community on HIV and AIDS, launching a full-scale marketing campaign with advertising around the valley and an active presence on social media in both English and Spanish.

The project is the first countywide version of its kind, following city-based models in areas like Brooklyn, the Bronx and San Francisco.

More than 30 years after the HIV and AIDS epidemic struck, causing hundreds to fall ill and die of a mystery disease, the science is finally there to make it something like polio where there was once widespread fear and death and now just a few, rare cases, project leaders say. It's about getting the community and health care network to participate.

Desert Regional Medical Center, which has committed \$1.5 million to the initiative as its lead sponsor, has been treating HIV and AIDS patients since the early days of the disease, opening a Special Care Unit in 1995 when it was still a leading cause of death.

"When this opportunity arrived, (we thought) what better way for Desert to get involved?" said Carolyn Caldwell, Desert Regional's president and CEO.

"Advances in medicine have increased the length and quality of life for those with HIV, but Desert Regional remains committed to the public health of our community and to helping work toward the eradication of HIV," she said in a statement.

She added later that through Get Tested Coachella Valley, which will also make HIV testing standard at the Palm Springs hospital, more people will be able to live longer, healthier lives.