

Faith Community Working to Prevent HIV/AIDS and Substance Abuse

By Sibyl K. Bowie

Closing the Gap, Substance Abuse Prevention: What's Working to Keep Our Youth Drug Free?
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In 1990, Greater Mount Calvary Holy Church, Washington, D.C., decided to confront the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It was a time when many churches had not yet begun to deal with the issue. The HIV/AIDS Ministry was received negatively at first. "You see, at that time HIV/AIDS was thought of as a homosexual disease," explained Bishop Alfred A. Owens, church pastor.

"But some of the members of our congregation had HIV/AIDS, and other community members began to come to the church seeking help—because at that time, there wasn't much information available on HIV/AIDS in the African American community. I was more concerned about the sheep of my pasture, and the community, than any opposition to our HIV/AIDS Ministry," he continued.

Initially, the HIV/AIDS Ministry provided voluntary caregiver assistance to HIV-infected District residents who did not have adequate support systems. Today, the Ministry has expanded its range of services to include: spiritual support, counseling, case management services, community outreach partnerships, HIV education, and peer educator training and certification.

Bridging the Gap

Mount Calvary's Alternative to Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program (CATAADA House) has been working to serve both the congregation and the community at-large since 1983. Bishop Owens' vision for the CATAADA House was born at a time when crack cocaine, marijuana, and alcohol had a chokehold on many young adults in the metropolitan area.

"The church was located right in the heart of a crack-addicted community," says Bishop Owens. "Prayer works, but we realized that people need rehabilitation also," said Dr. Kim M. Johnson, consultant to Mount Calvary's Women's Prevention and Counseling Program (WPCP).

While some of the program participants are church members, many of the individuals who participate in the CATAADA House Program have been ordered by the court to enroll into a substance abuse rehabilitation program. "Some of the participants are referred from area transitional homes that help homeless individuals and people in substance abuse recovery programs make the change to independent living," explained Natalie Bloodsworth, LGSW, WPCP. Others simply walk in.

The six-month program emphasizes spiritual growth and clinical counseling, while providing free, confidential alcohol and drug intervention services. Program participants receive an individualized treatment plan that focuses on relapse prevention and balanced living. Weekly Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings are also provided.

Strengthening the Link

In 1999, the HIV/AIDS Ministry and the CATAADA House began working together to develop a program that targets African American women between the ages of 25 and 44 who have a history of substance abuse. As a result, WPCP was formed to provide this much-needed HIV prevention program for the city. "The numbers that we have now indicate that one in 47 African Americans in the District of Columbia has AIDS—and we don't have a clue as to how many are HIV positive because unfortunately, the District doesn't track that information," said Dr. Johnson.

WPCP is designed to address the needs of participants during treatment and recovery from alcohol and drugs. Recognizing that individuals with a history of substance abuse are at higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, WPCP participants receive 10 weeks of prevention case management services, HIV education, and participate in self-esteem enhancement rap groups that offer a venue to address behavior change strategies.

"We designed a curriculum that uses a holistic approach with a spiritual component to educate and empower women. This model helps women understand themselves as a whole being," explains Dr. Johnson. "We're not *just* a body, so our curriculum recognizes the role of the mind as it relates to the body, soul, and spirit—and how that's connected to God."

WPCP is funded by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, a component of HHS' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Congress appropriated funds for this initiative as a result of collaborative efforts between the Congressional Black Caucus and Congressional Hispanic Caucus in response to the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on communities of color.

"To date, this program has served almost 1,000 District residents," according to Tonia F. Gray, executive director for HIV/AIDS Services at Mount Calvary, and project director for WPCP. "Since its inception, the CATAADA House has become a recognized source for substance abuse treatment in the District of Columbia, and now, WPCP has become a model for faith-based HIV prevention programs."

For more information on faith-based HIV/AIDS programs, contact Tonia F. Gray, executive director, HIV/AIDS Services and project director, WPCP, Greater Mount Calvary Holy Church at (202) 832-8291. ♦

