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Growing up HIV-positive, a reality more kids face each year

By: Christopher Sweeney

John Gafeney was diagnosed with HIV when he was 17 years old and already living on his own.

He contracted the disease from his partner, who told Gafeney he was HIV-positive after they were in their relationship for awhile.

Now 18, Gafeney lives in Wicker Park and takes a proactive approach to gaining a better understanding of the disease so he can plan for the future and help educate others.

He deals with routine check-ups and daily medications that are necessary to maintain his health. His biggest concern, however, is that there are not enough effective HIV-awareness programs available for youth, especially in the gay community.

HIV cases increased 30 percent in Illinois from 2001-2005 among youth 13 through 19 years of age. That increase brought the number of HIV positive teens to 409 in that age group.

Nearly 80 percent of the Illinois youth with HIV live in Cook County, according to the AIDS Foundation of Chicago and the Illinois Department of Public Health.

These statistics rely on cases reported to the Department of Public Health and don't accurately document the prevalence of HIV.

"We know a lot of cases go unreported across all age groups. I think a lot of times, people may not recognize the symptoms of HIV so they don't get tested. Somebody could go two, three, five, 10 years before being actually sick from HIV. So there is a real challenge in figuring out the actual number of cases," said John Peller, director of government relations at the AIDS Foundation of Chicago.

And the cause of the spike in HIV among the 13-19 age bracket is unclear. Lifestyle choices made at a younger age and lack of prevention programs play a major role.

"It's probably a combination of factors coming together. There's no question that the Bush administration has disinvested in HIV programs over the past eight years. Federal HIV funding has been consistently cut, which means the programs can't be put out on the street," Peller said.

In March alone, seven additional youths tested HIV-positive at the Howard Brown Health Center in Uptown. That's alarming, said Jessica Dubuar, organizer of the PATH Program at the center.

The PATH Program stands for Physical/Psychosocial Advocacy and Treatment for HIV. It is specifically designed to provide medical, mental and case management services for people 13 to 24 who are HIV-positive. The federally-funded program provides

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services for approximately 150 youths a year in Chicago and members are predominantly young gay men.

"There are a million different reasons for the need of the community" provided by this program, Dubuar said. "It erases stigma and decreases isolation. It's hard for them to deal with and, this way, people can talk about it and not worry."

Gafeney, who has found solace and assistance through the PATH Program, said one of the problems is that kids aren't receptive to the resources made available to raise awareness.

"How do we nurture the part of the youth that is still a five-year-old and prepare the part that is an adult?" Gafeney said. "Sex education at school and people standing on street corners handing out condoms and trying to coerce a kid to get tested ... that's the last thing on these kids' minds."

"The medications and the media have given all of us this mindset that whatever happens in life and whatever is a part of life can be fixed," Gafeney said. But when 16-year-olds adopt the mindset that they can survive with HIV by just taking a few pills, they are only thinking of today, he said.

"They aren't thinking about 10 or 20 years from now, that this pill will be taking away the fat cells in their face so they'll look like a skeleton. They're not thinking about how these medications destroy their liver and their kidneys," Gafeney said.

"One thing to think about is that new youth cases are certainly an ongoing tragedy and it's absolutely an issue we should all be concerned about from the public health and individual level," said Peller.

"But we also need to continue to look at infections among all groups. We need to take a hard look at where new cases are arising and make sure resources are being appropriately allocated," he said.