

World AIDS Day event organizers hope to fight complacency

By **CHRISTINE HAWES**
Sun Correspondent

Hundreds of people used to participate in Charlotte County's annual recognition of World AIDS Day 15 years ago with a walk across the A.W. Gilchrist Bridge, Eric Stockley recalls. By contrast, only about 10 people showed up about five years ago for a World AIDS Day walk held at a local school, says Stockley, HIV/AIDS coordinator for the Charlotte County Health Department. The lack of urgency has become only more evident since then, he says.

"A complacency has set in as this disease has become more treatable," Stockley says. "When I go in to talk to ninth-graders today, they talk about HIV the way we used to talk about syphilis and gonorrhea: 'I'll just take some medication if I get it. It's not going to kill me.'"

Stockley hopes this year's recognition of World AIDS Day will help revive awareness of acquired immune deficiency syndrome and HIV, the virus that causes the disease, and of signs that the virus is spreading at a faster rate once again. The rate of new AIDS cases in Charlotte County for the three-year period of 2006 to 2008, the latest period for which statistics are available, was 7.7 per 100,000 residents, according to the Florida Department of Health. By contrast, the rate for 2004 to 2006 was 6.3.

Of greatest concern are men, who account for more than half of all AIDS cases statewide.

Charlotte County is holding early recognitions of World AIDS Day, which is commemorated worldwide Dec. 1. Charlotte County holds its first World AIDS Day event today, when a Sarasota woman diagnosed with HIV 19 years ago speaks at a luncheon sponsored by a coalition of churches.

Monday, the health department will hold a play, free HIV testing and food collection for the Charlotte HIV/AIDS People Support food pantry. The two events stem out of Charlotte's newly invigorated participation in HANS, which is the HIV/AIDS Network of Southwest Florida. The group currently serves Charlotte, Sarasota and Manatee counties and helped bring pivotal Sarasota County resources to Charlotte County this year, Stockley said.

HANS helped bring guest speaker Valerie Wojciechowicz, a 46-year-old Sarasota resident who discovered she was HIV-positive in 1991 during a routine life insurance screening. Wojciechowicz later determined she had become infected in 1986.

The network also helped coordinate Monday's performance by the Suncoast AIDS Theatre Project, based in Sarasota. The group will perform "Men from the Mineshaft," a look at the events preceding the closing in 1985 of the Mineshaft, a New York City bar frequented by gay men and closed after health inspectors learned of heavy sexual activity that had contributed to the early spread of the AIDS virus.

Monday's event also will mark the first time that rapid testing for HIV, which provides preliminary results within 20 minutes, has been offered in Charlotte County. Rapid testing currently is approved for only pilot use in a few counties, including Sarasota, and that county's Community AIDS Network will provide the rapid testing in Charlotte for one night only.

Attendees of Monday's event are encouraged to bring a canned food item for CHAPS. "In this economy, they're hurting for supplies, so we thought this would be a chance to support them," Stockley said.

EVENTS

* HIV/AIDS Luncheon, 11:30 a.m. today -- featuring guest speaker Valerie Wojciechowicz, personal trainer and motivational speaker, on the topic of "Living with HIV." Cultural Center of Charlotte County, 2280 Aaron St., Port Charlotte. Call 941-743-6877 for reservations.

* World AIDS Day recognition, 6 p.m. Monday -- featuring the play "Men from the Mineshaft" by the Suncoast AIDS Theatre Project; free rapid HIV testing available. Charlotte County Health Department, 514 E. Grace St., Punta Gorda. Free admission with donation of a canned food item to Charlotte HIV/AIDS People Support.