TuSalud

Defeating AIDS, con Ganas

October 15 marks National Latinx AIDS Awareness Day, kicking off the new campaign “Defeating AIDS con Ganas” or, “Defeating AIDS With Power.”

October 15, 2016 By Casey Halter

We’re 10 minutes into a daylong HIV awareness campaign in the heart of Spanish Harlem, and already, three people have gotten tested.

Lazaro Gaspar, a 23-year-old community outreach specialist with Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan waits outside the 116th Street subway station, brochures clutched in hand.

“Hey, how’s your day going?” he asks, switching between English, Spanish and French, as a variety of hurried New Yorkers ascend from the station. “Have you heard about ‘Take the Test’?”

As one might expect on a busy Friday afternoon, most people walk past Gaspar, but those who stop—a pair of nervous-looking young women in matching pink lip gloss, an elderly Latino man on crutches, a tired-looking guy in a black T-shirt and matching baseball cap—decide to check out what’s going on.

“Just 60 seconds right?” asks the guy in the cap. “Yep, 60 seconds,” replies Anna Garcia, a nursing student working with the Mexican Coalition to help out with today’s event. He follows Garcia into a mobile testing unit right outside the station. The door closes, one more person knows his status.

Yesterday, more than 45 community health organizations mobilized across New York City to help get the word out about HIV in the Latino community. The campaign, titled “Take the Train/Take the Test,” was organized by the Latino Commission on AIDS (LCOA) and the New York City Department of Health. As part of the campaign, hundreds of activists, medical workers and advocates were embedded at similar locations outside 24 subway stations throughout the five boroughs.

The campaign’s goal? To promote HIV education, fight stigma and provide free testing deep within one of the most at-risk communities in today’s epidemic. The pop-up mobile testing stations also served as a lead-up to the 13th annual National Latinx AIDS Awareness Day (NLAAD), held every year on October 15 to help mobilize community-based organizations, leaders of the Latino community, health departments and elected officials to spread awareness within the Latino community specifically about HIV. (Latinx, pronounced “La-teen-ex,” is a gender-neutral alternative to Latino and Latina.)

Fighting Together

In 2014, Latinos accounted for almost 25 percent of all estimated new diagnoses of HIV in the United States and its associated territories, despite representing just 17 percent of the total U.S. population. Among the United States' largest and fastest-growing minority group, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 1 in 36 Latino men and 1 in 106 Latina women will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime.

The disparities remain constant even in New York City. Recently, local organizations reported that at the end of 2013, 32.4 percent of people living with HIV across the five boroughs (38,063 people), identified as Hispanic/Latino. Once again, that's despite the fact that New York City's Latino community currently makes up just 27 percent of the population.

According to Guillermo Chacon, CEO of the Latino Commission on AIDS, those numbers are why NLAAD is important. In fact, the awareness day, founded in 2003 by LCOA and the Hispanic Federation, was created in direct response to the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on Latino and Hispanic communities across the country. Now, after years of work, the organization is preparing to hone in on the epidemic.

"This year's theme, 'We will defeat AIDS con Ganas' (with power) reminds us that a generation free of AIDS is within our community's reach!" said Guillermo Chacon, CEO of the Latino Commission on AIDS, while speaking at a press conference earlier this week, held on the steps of New York's City Hall. "As such, this year's NLAAD has been rebranded as National Latinx Awareness Day in an effort to make sure we include everyone in this effort without regards to their gender identity."

The speech (given in Spanish) addressed a crowd of dozens of community activists, reporters and even Mayor Bill de Blasio who made sure to stop by in support. Representatives from the New York State Department of Health, who handed out flyers at the event, also looked proudly on as LCOA laid out its framework for the upcoming week of awareness in the Latinx community.

"Working with our community partners is a major component of our overall strategy to end AIDS in New York City," said Demetre Daskalakis, MD, assistant commissioner of the bureau of HIV/AIDS prevention and control in an email exchange about the DOH's involvement with NLAAD this year. "One of our goals is to make sure every New Yorker is aware of their HIV status—if negative, we can help link them to prevention services, like PrEP, which can help keep them negative; if positive, we can help link them to the care and support they'll need to stay healthy."

In fact, the DOH was integral to making the HIV testing event "Take the Train/Take the Test" happen, helping out LCOA by recruiting more than 45 community partners this year, including heavyweights like the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, GMHC and Housing Works to provide HIV testing and outreach for NLAAD. The governmental organization also supplied HIV testing kits and educational materials, helped connect health workers with local newspapers and advertised extensively on social media to spread the word in targeted communities.

“Take the Train/Take the Test”

“We are playing with the fact that in 2016, getting tested [for HIV] takes less time than it takes to wait for the train,” says Gustavo Morales, deputy director at LCOA and director of the organization’s access to care initiatives. Yesterday, he worked all day at the 116th Street subway station, doing outreach with the Mexican Coalition’s mobile unit. “The idea for this campaign is that we normalize HIV testing as a normal day-to-day thing. It’s something that everyone should be doing, no matter their gender, their status, their partner—no matter who they are.”

Here’s how “Take the Train/Take the Test” works: Mobile units are posted at every major subway station in the city, as well as hubs of New York’s Latino population—such as Spanish Harlem in Manhattan, South Williamsburg in Brooklyn and Jackson Heights in Queens—to promote HIV testing to Spanish-speaking and immigrant populations. Each unit is equipped with a number of third-generation, rapid HIV tests that can display results in as little as 60 seconds, as well as condoms, information packets and health workers, like Morales and Gaspar, who are stationed there to help connect people to health care.

Together, the mobile units reach out to a wide array of Latinos and Latinas across the city, from third-generation Puerto Rican locals to undocumented Mexican immigrants, who may have just arrived in the United States with their families.

“When we talk about the Latino community, we have to understand that there is not one definition or one definite pattern,” explains Morales, who has worked in HIV outreach in both the United States and in his native Puerto Rico for the last 15 years. “We are varied as humans. For example, in the immigrant community, many come here alone—they don’t have a support system, and that definitely impacts their access to health care and protecting themselves.”

Fortunately, it’s not just U.S.-based organizations that have been pitching in to bring HIV awareness into New York City’s Latino community for this year’s NLAAD. The Mexican Consulate recently partnered with LCOA’s campaign to help ensure that Mexicans are getting the care and resources they need to help end the epidemic outside their home country.

“HIV is a virus that is without borders and our community sometimes travels back and forth,” explains Karina Escamilla, health affairs coordinator at the Mexican Consulate, which organizes the Mexican Coalition and helped provide the mobile testing unit at 116th Street. “Testing our community in the United States is the only way to avoid the virus getting spread. It’s better to prevent than have our people get sick.”

According to Mexican Coalition’s Anna Garcia, the Mexican Consulate has been doing this kind of health outreach across the tristate area for years, bringing immigrants information about HIV as well as obesity, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) food subsidies, blood pressure, nutrition and other issues affecting the immigrant community. Today, the consulate also held a press conference about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) for HIV prevention as part of its observance of NLAAD.

Community Health Matters

Why exactly is all this community mobilization needed to address HIV/AIDS in the Latino community? In addition to having a heightened HIV risk overall, Latinos who identify as gay or bisexual are in the midst of an intensifying HIV epidemic across the country.

According to recent estimates from the CDC, nearly 1 in 4 same-gender-loving Latino men living in the United States will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime. What's more, since 2005, HIV rates among this high-risk group actually increased by 24 percent.

"The Latino Commission is extremely concerned with the increases of HIV cases among African-American and Latino young men who have sex with men and the stigma associated with HIV and AIDS," says Guillermo Chacon, CEO of the Latino Commission on AIDS. "We must do more to address these difficult challenges."

In addition to mobilizing these latest NLAAD campaigns, the LCOA recently opened a new wellness center for Latinx youth called The Oasis Center, which provides special sexual health services, HIV education and a safe space for LGBT Latino youth to talk about the issues they are dealing with every day.

"Stigma is still a huge thing in our community," says Gustavo Morales, who often works with youth at Oasis when he's not out testing with LCOA. "Stigma not only to living with HIV but actually getting tested and even having conversations around sex."

Health workers and advocates at various NLAAD events this week have also told us that often, for gay, queer or trans Latinx kids, a culture of machismo, homophobia and religion can make the silence around HIV even worse. That's why many feel it's so important for organizations across the city to come together and de-stigmatize the virus on the ground by doing HIV outreach on the streets, in local churches, at universities and bars.

LCOA recommends that every Latino in New York City get tested for HIV at least once a year, regardless of relationship status, gender, sexual orientation or behaviors. To learn more about how to get an HIV test or how to become involved with this year's National Latinx HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, click here.

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