

Targeting a scourge of youth

AIDS education event to target ages 13-24

BY JOHN LAUNGER

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Rep. Gregory W. Meeks announces the AIDS Center of Queens County's 2007 Conference for Teens, Adolescents and Young Adults. The conference will be followed by a "prom."

With HIV/AIDS Continuing to take a toll on young people worldwide, activists have scheduled a special event Friday to boost the fight to keep the virus from spreading in Queens.

On that day, the AIDS Center of Queens County will hold its first education and entertainment event specifically for young people between the ages of 13 and 24.

Billed as the 2007 Conference for Teens, Adolescents and Young Adults, the event will wind up with a "prom."

"AIDS is destroying the next generation of our youth," said ACQC Executive Director Philip Glotzer, who pointed out that since the AIDS epidemic began, more than half of all infections worldwide have been among people under the age of 25. "We have to do a better job meeting the needs of our young people."

The conference will feature several workshops where young people can learn about HIV/AIDS and how to protect themselves from infection.

There will be free confidential screening for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, and leading HIV/AIDS specialists will be on hand to answer questions.

Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-southeast Queens), who was instrumental in planning the upcoming conference, railed against potential cuts to federal AIDS funding, which he said would undermine efforts to combat the spread of the virus in minority communities.

Meeks pointed out that Queens has a higher number of people suffering from HIV/AIDS than the HIV/AIDS populations of 40 states.

"We've got to continue to fight for Congress to bring more funding into New York," the congressman said.

ACQC, founded in 1986, is the lead provider for the county's only federally funded HIV Care Network. Dr. Marc Johnson, health chairman for the network and a physician at New York Hospital Queens, said that educating young people "is really how we are going to stem the tide of HIV and AIDS infections."

Glotzer said that even though HIV/AIDS is disproportionately impacting black and Hispanic youth in underprivileged communities in Queens, all young people are at risk for contracting the virus.

"It's a recipe for disaster unless they have people to go to talk to about options," he said.

ACQC and some of the 40 or so other organizations in the network use peer educators to warn young people about the dangers of unprotected sex and intravenous drug use.

The conference will conclude with peer educators from throughout the network and young people either infected or affected by the virus celebrating in prom-like fashion at an event dubbed "A Hero's Ball."