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Rochester-area Latino faith community reaches out to inform about HIV

MEAGHAN M. MCDERMOTT • STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 7, 2008

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The Rev. Angel Rosado was dismayed when a friend in Puerto Rico died destitute and alone, stigmatized and shunned by his family and faith [community](#) after he contracted HIV helping the victim of a bloody bar fight.

Rosado, pastor of Temple Pentecostal Peniel in Rochester, pledged then that he would always offer those with HIV infections mercy and compassion.

"I made a promise in my soul that whenever I can help someone with AIDS, I will, no matter what their family or anyone else says," he said.

During the third annual Latino Community Faith-based HIV Conference on Saturday at Obra

de Dios Pentecostal Church on Joseph Avenue, Rosado volunteered to demonstrate with a worker from the state health department the ease of getting a rapid HIV test.

Free HIV testing was offered onsite during the conference, as well as skits about how the virus can and cannot be transmitted, testimony from people who have contracted HIV and a question-and-answer session for the audience. More than 60 people attended and [organizers](#) hoped at least 35 people would undergo the free tests. At last year's event, 30 people were tested.

The conference was sponsored by Ibero-American Action League, AIDS Community Health Center, Project WAVE New York, the Center for Community Health and the Fraternity of Hispanic Pastors of Rochester.

Doris Irizarry, a caseworker with Ibero and conference [organizer](#), said the event came together because of a need in the Latino faith community to talk openly and honestly about HIV, to "break the taboo" of talking about such things in church.

"There was a concern of people coming to the churches with questions or HIV and pastors not knowing how to address that," she said. "There is a real need to get information out there. There is still fear and myths out there."

The Rev. Elias Neves, pastor of Obra de Dios, said churches are uniquely positioned to help people with HIV meet their social, emotional, physical and spiritual needs.

"I knew a family from church who had a great social interaction with a young lady, but they found out she was HIV positive and cast her out," he said. "We need to let the faith community and the Latino community know that we need to help (people with HIV), not cast them out, that you do not get HIV from shaking hands, sharing plates or touching."

Recent research shows the Latino community in the United States is disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS.

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According to the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation, Latinos have the second-highest AIDS case rate in the nation by race/ethnicity. And there is a disproportionate impact on women and young adults.

Irizarry said that's another reason to get the word out about the importance of being tested for HIV, so people don't unknowingly pass the virus to others.

"We don't want this epidemic to spread," she said. "If even just one person in 10 who comes here listens and learns to protect themselves, that's good."

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