

Working with homeless shelters to expand reach

Model works in other settings, as well

The AIDS Service Center New York City (ASC) in New York, NY, teams up with the city's homeless shelters to expand its reach into high-risk communities.

"People residing in homeless shelters are marginalized and are often outside the health care delivery system, and they often have issues of mental illness and drug addiction," says Sharen Duke, MPH, chief executive officer of ASC.

"So all of those behaviors place them at very high risk for HIV," Duke says.

Since homeless shelters typically do not have services related to HIV prevention, ASC has targeted the shelters for collaborative educational services.

ASC sends peer educators, who have had similar life experiences as the people found in homeless shelters, to the shelters to talk about HIV testing, Duke says.

The peer educators often have been homeless and have pasts that include drug abuse and prostitution, Duke notes.

"They can say, 'I've walked your walk, and you can do something different,'" Duke says.

This program is a good example of how ASC targets organizations that cater to high-risk populations, but which do not directly provide HIV services, she notes.

"We also go into PTAs in East and Central

Harlem in collaboration with public schools, and we target women through coffee klatches and do educational workshops on HIV prevention, women's anatomy, reproductive health, and how to talk with your children and disclosure issues," Duke explains. "It's taking the model of HIV prevention and bringing it to people who don't have the expertise, but who would benefit from it."

ASC provides HIV testing and counseling to those people in homeless shelters, and provides wrap-around support that connects homeless clients to medical care and treatment when they are diagnosed as HIV positive, Duke adds.

"The beauty of this collaboration is that everyone wins," she says. "And this is consistent with the New York City Health Department's goals of identifying people who are living with the virus but are unaware of their HIV status."

Unfortunately, the city's funding shortfalls have forced it to cut some services that needed by HIV clients, including discontinuing harm reduction outreach in homeless shelters, Duke notes.

"This program is ending in June, and it's been successful for about 10 years," she says.

The health department has made it a priority to identify people unaware of their serostatus, Duke says.

"They say there are 4,800 New Yorkers who are HIV positive and don't know it," Duke says. "And this is a program that identifies them and connects them with care, so it's my hope they'll find other resources to sustain this kind of service because it's certainly needed." ■