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Black Gay Men Gather On HIV

By: DUNCAN OSBORNE
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Gary English, seen at the 2003 Pride in the City family picnic when he was executive director of People in Color in Crisis, was credited as having been instrumental in bringing the National Black Gay Men's Advocacy Coalition into being.

BY DUNCAN OSBORNE

A town meeting on African-American gay men and HIV drew roughly 100 people to a Brooklyn hotel where a coalition of groups and individuals called on them to act.

"The coalition came about because as black gay men we saw too many of our brothers dying," said Rudolph H. Carn, a member of the National Black Gay Men's Advocacy Coalition. "The reason we started this coalition is because too many of us are dying."

The coalition, which has a 13-member executive committee comprised of representatives from across the country, was formed in response to a 2005 study from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

That study tested 1,767 gay and bisexual men in five American cities and found that 46 percent of the African-American men were HIV-positive. Sixty-seven percent of the positive black men did not know they were infected.

Twenty-one percent of the white men were infected and 17 percent of the Latino men were HIV-positive. Eighteen percent of the positive white men did not know they were infected as was the case with 48 percent of the Latino men.

Other studies published before and since the Johns Hopkins study have also found the highest HIV rates among black gay men compared to other gay men.

"The point is the numbers were way off the charts," said Leo Rennie, a coalition member and a staffer in the city health department in Washington, D.C. "The fact that HIV disparately impacts black gay men is not in contention."

What the coalition members also said was that there was no response in 2005.

"The data was coming out, we knew it was coming out, and there was collective silence," Rennie said. "There was a collective silence among black gay leaders."

Speakers at the August 1 town meeting, which was held at the New York Marriott at the Brooklyn Bridge a day before start of Pride in the City, a weekend of black gay pride events, credited Gary English, the former head of People of Color in Crisis (POCC), a Brooklyn AIDS group, with rallying the community in 2005.

Through a series of meetings in 2005 and 2006 AIDS activists, researchers, and academics developed the coalition. It advocates for more research on African-American gay men and HIV, more HIV prevention dollars for that community, and more services for those men.

The coalition does not accept cash from the government.

"We don't take government money because we don't want them telling us what we can and cannot do," said Carn who is also the chairman of the National AIDS Education Services for Minorities, an Atlanta AIDS group. "That frees us up to do advocacy, to be critical."

The coalition has already lobbied members of Congress, including staff from the office of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a California Democrat. They have met with staff at the National Institutes of Health and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to win support for their agenda.

"It is our time," Carn said. "We can do this, we need to move forward and save our brothers' lives."

Some in the audience questioned the strategy and called for more aggressive action, citing the African-American civil rights movement, the work of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), and protests that ended the Defense Department using Vieques, a Puerto Rican island, as a bombing range.

"We're not at the point where we can call for 2,000 people to show up," said Ron Simmons, a coalition member and the executive director of Us Helping Us, a Washington, D.C. AIDS group.

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The town meeting also included a presentation from groups that are organizing HIV prevention efforts among African-American gay men.

Kwame Banks, the founder of Safer+Saner, a group that delivers HIV prevention programming to the leather and kink communities, discussed working with black gay men in that community. He launched the group after being named the American Leatherman of 2005.

"I was like the Vanessa Williams of leather," he said.

Safer+Saner sells a book, "FUNK! (Fuckin' Unadulterated Nasty Kink!) A Brutha's Guide to SAFER + SANER Leathersex," to support its work.

Ricky Day, a party promoter, described The Core NYC, an organization of promoters who serve African-American gay men that is delivering HIV prevention, health, and other messages to customers.

"We've got everyone's ear and we want to be responsible for that," he said.

Day was joined by roughly a dozen promoters from across the country who have launched the Promise campaign which talks about self-respect, safe sex, and responsibility. The promoters have created a Web site, thecorenyc.com, which sells their parties to a national audience and also their message.

"We're here to make sure we give back to the community in a meaningful way," Day said.

The town meeting was sponsored by POCC, Gay Men of African Descent, an AIDS group headquartered in Harlem, and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

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