

Mobilizing Florida Churches in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS

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Faith has always played an influential role within the black community; and, throughout history, churches have served as a foundation for building community strength, healthy lifestyles, and inspiring change. Hence, it seems only natural that the Florida Department of Health (DOH) would tap into the faith community for the mobilization of HIV prevention efforts statewide.

As the newest initiative of the *We Make the Change (WMTC)* campaign, the Bureau of HIV/AIDS joined forces with the Eleventh Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and the General Baptist State Convention. Our AME partnership goal is to establish at least one AME church in each of Florida's 67 counties as an HIV testing site or test location. Our partnership with the General Baptist State Convention establishes an HIV outreach system with faith-based organizations affiliated with the Convention.

Recent data show that 114,057 adults in Florida are currently living with HIV/AIDS. Of the HIV cases reported in 2008, (46%) were among blacks. As blacks continue to be disproportionately impacted by HIV, DOH and faith leaders are working together to reduce stigma and provide HIV testing and prevention.

It is important that we encourage congregations to discuss the effects of HIV/AIDS on Florida's black communities. By addressing denial issues in the faith community associated with the disease, we can promote the importance of HIV testing and knowing your status. We can provide better care and treatment to those infected.

As part of the initiative, *We Make The Change* utilizes community faith-based events – church conferences, concerts, and other events throughout the state – as opportunities for HIV prevention efforts. We provide materials to congregations for use in their activities and offer technical support to those providing prevention services.

The first week of March marks National Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS. The Florida Department of Health, in partnership with the Balm in Gilead, is organizing churches statewide in a group prayer for the healing of AIDS. The goal is to bring together 670 churches - 10 congregations from each county in Florida.

For more information on how you can join our efforts in prayer, a list of faith-based test locations, or to sign up for our e-newsletter, visit www.WeMaketheChange.com.