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## HIV & AIDS Health Center

### Feds Try to Break Through HIV Complacency

#### New HIV Campaign, Forthcoming Policy to Target High-Risk Groups

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WebMD Health News

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April 7, 2009 - Federal health officials are trying to reignite flagging national awareness of [HIV](#) infection with a media effort targeted at high-risk groups.

New infections with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, were estimated by the CDC at 56,000 in 2006 in the U.S. The number has remained essentially unchanged for a decade, frustrating public health officials.

A new \$45 million media campaign is set to target African-American groups, including [teens](#), gay and bisexual men, and heterosexual women, about the risk of HIV infection and the value of testing for the virus. About one-fifth of the estimated 1 million Americans infected with HIV don't know they have the virus, putting them at high risk for spreading the infection or progressing to AIDS themselves, according to the CDC.

"The president is deeply concerned about these numbers," says White House Domestic Policy Council Director Melody Barnes. "We need to drastically reduce infection rates."

The White House is expected to release a new domestic HIV/AIDS strategy "in the coming weeks," Jeffrey Crowley, director of the White House Office of AIDS Policy, tells WebMD.

Crowley says the strategy will back up President Obama's pledge to base national science policy on "sound science." That is likely to include controversial efforts promoting needle exchange programs, he says. Such programs have been shown to cut HIV infections rates among injection drug users, but they're also politically charged because some believe they tacitly promote illegal drug use.

"The president believes that syringe exchange programs should play a role," Crowley says. "Certainly those types of issues will be considered."

The national media effort is slated to spend \$9 million per year over five years on public service announcements, Internet marketing, and other outreach programs. Officials say they would also spend \$2 million per year partnering with more than a dozen African-American organizations to incorporate [HIV prevention](#) and testing messages into their community outreach programs.

Officials say those efforts will be followed by campaigns aimed at Latinos and other groups where infections rates are highest.

"The HIV epidemic has fallen off the radar screen at exactly the time when our friends at the CDC tell us it's a much larger epidemic than we thought it was," says Drew Altman, PhD, president of the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

Public health experts say one reason is because of the success of [AIDS treatments](#) like antiretroviral [medication](#). Because HIV infection is no longer directly equated with a death sentence, many young people don't fear it as they once did.

Forty-five percent of adults in a Kaiser Foundation preliminary survey released last week said they'd heard at least some about the AIDS epidemic in the past year, down from 70% in 2004. Similar disparities were seen among African-American adults.

The Rev. Darlene R. Nipper, deputy executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, calls Tuesday's White House announcement "a good start."

But Nipper suggests that advertising campaigns, no matter how sophisticated, may not succeed in putting a dent in U.S. HIV infection rates. "We want to know what the policy is going to be," she says.

"I have to be bombarded with the information, the message, about what I need to do and I need to understand it like I understand my name," she says.

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