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Hispanics, young men drive rise in AIDS cases

BY JEREMY OLSON

Pioneer Press

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New HIV infections in Minnesota reached a 10-year high in 2006, largely because of an increase in cases among Hispanics and young men, the state health department reported Monday.

The number of new cases overall rose from 301 in 2005 to 318 last year, while the number of new Hispanic cases nearly doubled from 23 to 44.

Whether that represents a rising trend or a one-year anomaly is unclear, "but that is definitely something we're going to watch, because the numbers jumped dramatically," said Luisa Pessoa-Brandatilde, who coordinates the state's HIV and AIDS surveillance.

Education and prevention programs to reduce cases of the sexually transmitted disease among blacks born in Africa have paid off, she said. While that immigrant group still has Minnesota's highest rate of HIV and AIDS, the number of new cases has dropped for the second year in a row.

The latest data suggest other populations need focused education programs, said Linda Teel, executive director of the Minnesota AIDS Project. "Public health research has shown that using proven, culturally relevant prevention methods (is) the only sure way to stop HIV infection and reduce transmission."

She challenged state lawmakers to come up with the funding.

The 2006 state health report shows that there were 35 new HIV cases among men ages 13 to 24, a doubling since 2002. New cases also have increased, though less dramatically, among young women, suburban residents and white and black women.

HIV

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stands for human immunodeficiency virus, which is transmitted primarily through sexual contact. The infection can lead to AIDS, or Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, which is diagnosed by the number of

infection-fighting T-cells a patient has left.

Almost three people in 10 with the illness are diagnosed with an HIV infection and AIDS at the same time. That number jumps to nearly five in 10 Hispanics.

That is troubling because it means those people missed out on years of treatments that could have delayed or prevented AIDS, and also because they may have unknowingly infected others, Pessoa-Brandatilde said. "If you're positive and you don't know it, there's always a risk you are passing an infection to someone else."

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new recommendations last fall that all people be tested for HIV in the regular course of their medical care.

While the annual number of new Minnesota HIV cases has hovered around 300 for years, Pessoa-Brandatilde said she believes the state eventually can drive that number down. However, if local physicians follow the new federal guidelines, there may be a short-term increase in new HIV cases in the coming years.

More than 5,500 people in Minnesota are living with HIV or AIDS. The state reported 56 AIDS-related deaths last year.

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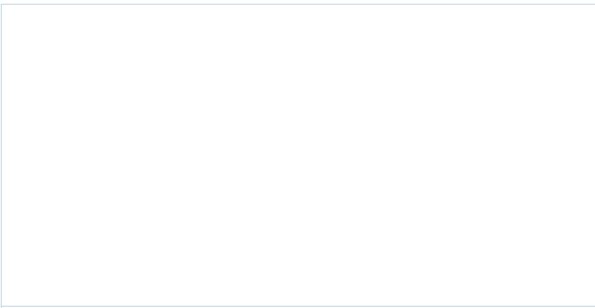
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