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AIDS expo draws 100 people to Palm Springs

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The Desert Sun

An AIDS expo in Palm Springs that kicked off the White Party drew about 100 people to the convention center today.

The National Association of People with AIDS hosted the expo as part of their regional meeting to encourage those living with HIV/AIDS locally to talk about their concerns and advocate for effective state and federal policies.

"We're taking it on the road so we can hear from different communities to hear what their concerns and needs are," Stephen Bailous, a spokesman with the agency, said.

"It's important that we continue to do this to empower the community."

Founded in 1983, the Maryland-based nonprofit advocates and educates policy makers on behalf of those living with HIV/AIDS.

HIV/AIDS is an issue that is particularly important in the Palm Springs area, which boasts one of the largest gay populations per capita in the United States. Gay and bisexual men of all races account for the majority of those living with HIV.

"We've got to make it easy for people to get care," Bailous said.

The topics included in the regional meeting were party drugs and HIV, dating with HIV and HIV and Hepatitis.

The prevalence of drug use among gays varies, but a 2001 study showed that 15 percent of men having sex with men in San Francisco had used methamphetamines during anal sex. Meth use among gays locally and during the White Party in particular, has been a concern among healthcare advocates.

About a dozen people attended a panel discussion Friday on party drugs and HIV who were interested in whether meth could be used recreationally without becoming addicted.

"It's kind of like playing Russian roulette," said Mike Rizzo, manger of the crystal meth recovery services with the LA Gay and Lesbian Center.

"The odds are against you. Why risk it?"

Among some of the concerns the association has fielded are health care costs associated with HIV and access to care.

The AIDS expo coincided with White Party, the largest most well-known event for gay men in the U.S. Founded in 1990, the White Party attracts about 20,000 men to the valley each year who spend about \$3.9 million in the local economy.

"One of the wonderful things these regional NAPWA meetings do is help fight the stigma and isolation that still exists for many people living with HIV or AIDS," David Brinkman, executive director of Desert

AIDS Project said in a statement to The Desert Sun.

“They provide a forum for discussing their concerns with others who truly understand. Since that’s a part of what we do every day at D.A.P., we were so happy to have the ‘AIDS in America’ Expo right here in our backyard.”

Established in 1984, the Desert AIDS Project serves people in the valley living with HIV and AIDS with medical care and social services.

In 2006, about 1.1 million adults and adolescents were living with HIV/AIDS in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About one in five do not know they are infected.

Each year in California, an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 people become infected.

California has one of the highest infection rates in the U.S. with more than 93,000 people living with HIV/AIDS, according to the California Department of Public Health Office of AIDS. Riverside County ranks fifth in the state with about 4,200 people infected or living with AIDS.

Additional Facts

If you go

What: AIDS expo

When: 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. April 10

Where: Palm Springs Convention Center

Info: To register, go to www.napwa.org
