

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **SIGNIFICANT DISPARITIES EXIST BETWEEN VIRGINIA POPULATIONS**

*National Black HIV/AIDS Black Awareness Day February 7, 2008*

(Richmond, Va.)—"Prevention is power." The message for this year's National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day underscores the significance of education, testing and treatment for HIV in communities disproportionately affected by the disease.

In 2005, Black males in Virginia were 9 times more likely to be diagnosed with HIV/AIDS compared to White males. The HIV rate among Black women in Virginia is approximately four times that of their White counterparts. Although they represent 10 percent of Virginia's population, Black women accounted for 21 percent of the new HIV cases reported in 2005.

"While a person's race does not place them at risk for HIV infection, high rates of HIV in the Black community makes risky behaviors more likely to result in new HIV infections", explained Elaine Martin, director of community services in the Virginia Department of Health's (VDH) Division of Disease Prevention. Between 2001 and 2005, the primary modes of transmission among Blacks in Virginia were through heterosexual contact, injection drug use, and among men who have sex with men. Socioeconomic factors such as poverty and lack of access to healthcare also play a role. Eighty-six percent of HIV reports in Virginia's poorest census tracts were among Blacks.

"Stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV and homosexuality in the African American community are barriers we try to overcome through our education and interventions," Martin said. African American gatekeepers and opinion leaders, such as faith leaders and other community leaders, play a key role in reaching African Americans who are not being reached through other prevention efforts.

(more)

Through the 2008 Comprehensive HIV Prevention Plan, VDH and community partners have outlined a course of action to address the behaviors and roadblocks contributing to the disproportionate impact of HIV/AIDS on Blacks. Interventions are targeted to specific behaviors and populations and each one is based on behavioral and/or social science theory and has proven effective in reducing risk behaviors. “Working with our community partners to find effective ways to make this happen is essential to reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS among Blacks, Martin explained. “Education, testing and treatment are what we need to provide.” New contracts were recently awarded under VDH’s minority AIDS Project grant program. This program was established in 1988 and targets communities of color disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS in the Commonwealth. In addition, VDH’s African American Faith Initiative grant program supports partnerships with black churches in Virginia.

The VDH Office of Minority Health and Public Health Policy (OMHPHP) leads multiple initiatives that support the Division of Disease Prevention’s work. Among these, OMHPHP is working to address the root causes of the inequities in HIV/AIDS rates and other diseases affecting African Americans by promoting the PBS documentary entitled “Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?”, which will air beginning in March of 2008 ([www.unnaturalcauses.org](http://www.unnaturalcauses.org)). This documentary seeks to mobilize action among communities and policy makers to address social injustices such as racism, and the related social determinants of health such as poverty, residential racial segregation, and limited educational and employment opportunities that underlie the racial inequities in HIV/AIDS. OMHPHP promotes access to quality health care, responsible individual behaviors, community participatory interventions, and social justice as prerequisites to achieving health equity.

For more a list of National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day events, information about HIV/AIDS in Virginia and details on the Comprehensive HIV Prevention Plan, go to <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/Epidemiology/DiseasePrevention/>.

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