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Feb. 5, 2009

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NEW ROLE FOR FAITH LEADERS IN FIGHT AGAINST HIV/AIDS

National Black AIDS Awareness Day is Feb. 7

(RICHMOND, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health calls on faith leaders to join a new wave of African American clergy supporting the fight against HIV/AIDS among black Virginians.

As National Black AIDS Awareness Day approaches on Feb. 7, the weight of HIV/AIDS still falls heavily on blacks in Virginia. Sixty-two percent of the approximately 21,000 Virginians living with HIV are black, according to the Virginia Department of Health. Black women account for 77 percent of women living with HIV/AIDS in the Commonwealth. Public health officials say that faith leaders and their institutions are essential to changing those trends.

“Faith institutions serve as a spiritual, moral and cultural center of many black communities,” said Marquetta Alston, VDH’s Assistant Director of HIV Prevention. “People tend to be more open to receiving prevention messages when those messages come from respected people in their community.”

Faith leaders can influence community perceptions about HIV, homosexuality, behaviors that can reduce risk and promote testing and entrance into health care. “As perceptions within the faith community change, perceptions within the larger community can occur,” Alston said.

“The best thing you can do is arm yourself with information” about HIV/AIDS and its prevention, said the Rev. Felecia Jones, Director of Hope Institute at Great Hope Baptist Church in Richmond’s Church Hill neighborhood. “No one chooses to be sick.”

A new generation of faith leaders is bringing their theological training on issues such as social justice, poverty and HIV/AIDS to their congregations, said the Rev. Nan Brown, executive director of Way of the Cross Community Development Corp. and retired pastor of Way of the Cross Baptist Church in Fluvanna County. “For many years, the attitudes of faith leaders have been changing and significantly so,” she said. “It was not unusual years ago for the subject of HIV/AIDS to be avoided in the some churches.”

In fact, Brown said, she remembers an occasion when congregants were instructed by their pastor to walk out when Brown spoke about HIV. She said churches now increasingly ask her to present programs on HIV/AIDS.

Faith-based programs and partnerships are an important element in VDH's Comprehensive [HIV Prevention Plan](#). The African American Faith Initiative Grant provides federal funding to three programs in Virginia, which in turn often partner with other faith institutions to extend their reach.

To mark National Black AIDS Awareness Day on Feb. 7, programs and HIV testing will be offered by community partners throughout the Commonwealth. For information about HIV/AIDS, including free HIV testing and a list of National Black AIDS Awareness Day events, log onto www.vdh.virginia.gov or call the Virginia HIV/STD Hotline at 800-533-4148.

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