

Serving Those at Risk for HIV/AIDS

IF YOU THOUGHT HIV/AIDS was a health epidemic from the past, Sharon Parker has news for you. The disease is spreading through at-risk populations, and her research aims to identify these groups and make them aware of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), which is a course of HIV drugs taken by HIV-negative people to prevent infection. Truvada® is a daily pill that reduces the risk of contracting HIV by at least 90 percent when taken as prescribed. PrEP is prescribed through the N.C. A&T Student Health Center and other healthcare providers, however, many people are unaware of PrEP and have little information about the medication.

Getting a prescription for PrEP means admitting to a lifestyle which places people at risk for contracting HIV, but Parker wants to emphasize the most important point which is personal safety and overall health and wellbeing. She helps individuals assess their own risk for contracting HIV. She is the chairperson for the Triad PrEP Work Group which is a collaboration between community-based agencies, local health

departments, Cone Hospital, Carolina Central Health Network, the NC AIDS Action Network and Wake Forest University.

People who meet one of the following criteria can benefit from taking PrEP: (1) have a partner who is HIV-positive, (2) have multiple sex partners or your partner has multiple sex partners whose HIV status is unknown, (3) have sex without a condom, (4) recent history of a sexually transmitted disease (5) share needles or equipment to inject drugs, or (6) recently released from a drug program. To some Americans, these populations may seem isolated and insignificant, but a disease like HIV/AIDS affects every community across the U.S. “There will always be people who participate in risky behaviors. You can pretend they don’t exist, but they do, and they’re right next door. Successful public health initiatives face reality and address health concerns with honesty, acceptance and optimism.”

Parker has four research grants underway which help her find people who could benefit from taking PrEP. She is the

principal investigator for a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Center for AIDS Research Developmental Award funded by the National Institutes of Health. The study, *Perspectives of HIV Prevention among Incarcerated Women: Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis as a Potential Biomedical HIV Intervention*, aims to learn more about women’s knowledge of HIV and PrEP, explore barriers and facilitators to the uptake of PrEP, factors that contribute to high risk behaviors and their perceptions of preventing HIV infection by taking PrEP after release from prison. The study focuses on women with a history of sex work or survival sex and is being conducted at the North Carolina Correctional Institute for Women.

She is a collaborator in *Bringing Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis to Campus: Understanding HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis Uptake Behaviors at Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, a study funded through Duke University and the National Institutes of Health. Parker’s research focuses on generating new knowledge about students’ familiarity and perception of HIV, knowledge of PrEP, students’ willingness to take PrEP if



Kathy Norcott and Sharon Parker educate Piedmont citizens about HIV prevention

prescribed by a physician, and barriers and facilitators to the uptake of the drug. The study is designed to identify methods to introduce new biomedical HIV prevention tools to students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Parker is a member of the HIV/AIDS Interdisciplinary Working Group (HIW) involving faculty from the University of South Carolina, University of Georgia, Georgia Southern University, N.C. A&T, as well as community-based agencies and persons living with HIV (PLWH). The HIW

to PLWH and to increase HIV/AIDS care through the enhancement of collaborative relationships with community agencies serving PLWH and develop a community-engaged response to the HIV epidemic.

Parker is a co-investigator on the grant *Preparing for Prison Release* in collaboration with the UNC Center for Aids Research Developmental Award. HIV prevalence among the prison population is three-to-five times higher than the non-incarcerated population, because prisoners disproportionately come from

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implemented a study, *HIV/AIDS Community Needs Assessment in Three Southern States*, to better understand services provided to PLWH in South Carolina, Georgia, and North Carolina. The study is designed to access services provided

groups impacted by HIV (people who use drugs, racial-ethnic minorities, lower socioeconomic status individuals). People released from prison are also more likely to have engaged in high-risk HIV behaviors such as commercial sex work and drug use. Since some incarcerated people could really benefit from PrEP, Parker and colleagues propose to examine the integration of PrEP as a part of the *Formerly Incarcerated Transitions (FIT)* program which currently links people released from prison to a primary care provider.

The medical and pharmacological advances towards the spread of HIV/AIDS have been truly remarkable, and are something our society can take great pride in. Thanks to decades of research and funding, many people with HIV live long, full lives. Now, we have the ability to prevent this disease altogether, if we put forth a concerted effort to put PrEP in the hands of people who need it. ■