

**Health and Senior Services Commissioner
Heather Howard, J.D.
Wednesday, February 6, 2008
Trenton Marriott Main Ballroom
9:30 am**

Good morning.

Rev. Justice and the NJ Human Development Corp.

Bishop and Mrs. Norris

Reverend Clergy

Assistant Commissioner Larry Ganges and his
outstanding staff at the Division of HIV/AIDS Services.

They do an amazing job.

Good morning

Thank you for inviting me to join you in commemorating
National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day.

As you well know, the major challenge that we face now
and will continue to face is to reduce the disproportionate
impact that HIV/AIDS continues to cause in the African
American community.

A few key statistics should guide us as we begin the day:

- The mortality rate for HIV/AIDS in New Jersey is still 16 times higher for blacks than whites.
- HIV/AIDS is the third leading cause of death among black males.
- It is the fifth leading cause of death among black females.
- It is the number one cause of death among all blacks aged 25 to 44 years old.
- Minorities diagnosed with HIV progress to AIDS significantly faster than whites because they tend to get tested later in their infection.
- While the overall death rate has declined for all groups, the disparity that existed 10-15 years ago persists.
- That's why the theme: "Prevention is Power" is so important because half of those who are tested each year in New Jersey are African American or Latino.

- The Department, in cooperation with our community partners, has employed some innovative prevention initiatives in recent years, doing outreach to high risk African Americans and Latinos in houses of faith, beauty salons and barber shops.
- We must stress the importance not only of getting individuals tested, but also of having those who test positive get treated.
- We must use every weapon in our arsenal to reduce the disparity and devastation that HIV/AIDS continues to cause in the African American community
- We cannot afford to be complacent when 55% of the 34,200 people living with HIV/AIDS in New Jersey are African American
- And 67% of the children living with HIV/ADS are African American
- New Jersey got a new weapon in last year with pilot needle exchange programs in Atlantic City, Camden & Paterson. And a pilot project will begin later this month in Newark

- And Rapid HIV testing continues to be a success in New Jersey. More than 80,700 New Jersey residents took the Rapid HIV test in 2006 & more than 125,000 clients have taken it since Nov. 2003
- But we must promote syringe exchange within the context of a larger prevention strategy.
- Syringe exchange cannot replace education, drug & medical treatment, HIV counseling and testing.
- We also have to reduce the stigma and discrimination that has been associated with this disease in the past
- And one of the ways that we can reduce stigma and discrimination is to follow the CDC recommendations that all adults and adolescents should be routinely tested for HIV in hospitals, clinics and doctors' offices.
- We must make getting an HIV test as normal as getting a medical checkup or an eye exam.
- Another weapon in our arsenal is the new law that requires HIV screening of women at least twice during pregnancy.

- We have to continue to think outside the box if we are going to reduce the transmission of HIV/AIDS and narrow the disparities gap
- Let me give you an example of how the Department is trying to think outside the box.
- The Division of AIDS Services recently received a grant from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for \$1.5 million to expand HIV testing for African Americans. We decided to focus our effort on county jails, since routine HIV testing is now (since April 2007) performed routinely on all individuals admitted to the State correctional system. Funding will be provided to several high volume county correctional facilities with a significant percentage of African American inmates to hire staff to provide routine HIV testing. These services will complement the already existing re-entry programs we have in place in selected county facilities.
- New Jersey is one of the wealthiest states in one of the wealthiest countries on the planet. We simply have to do better.

- I survived my first month as commissioner of the Department of Health and Senior Services.
- And I want all of you to know that I am committed to work with all of you to use every weapon in our arsenal to reduce the transmission of HIV/AIDS and to narrow the unacceptable health disparities gap that has disproportionately impacted the African American community.
- I look forward to working with all of you as we continue to work hard to reduce the transmission of HIV/AIDS in all communities in our state.