



VA World AIDS Day, December 1, 2011

Chaplain Talking Points

Dear Chaplains:

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the first diagnosed cases of AIDS in the United States. VA has played a major role in combating the disease and caring for Veterans living with HIV. VA is focusing on the exceptional quality of care it provides and on the need to continue promoting routine HIV testing for all Veterans.

The prevalence of HIV is still increasing in the United States. There are an estimated 1.1 million HIV-infected persons, of whom 21% do not know they are infected. There are also 50,000 to 60,000 new diagnoses every year, with HIV transmission rates higher among people who do not know they are HIV infected. In 2010, we increased VA HIV testing rates from less than 10% to 13.5%. As you can see, our work is not done.

VA, the largest provider of HIV care in the nation, has made tremendous strides in the treatment and care of Veterans with HIV infection. Currently, more than 24,000 Veterans with HIV are receiving care. Very effective HIV treatments are now available to all Veterans infected with the virus. Treatment can be as simple as one pill, once a day. HIV infection is a chronic disease - no longer a death sentence.

In 2011, the US government's World AIDS Day theme is "Leading with Science, Uniting for Action," VA recommends that every Veteran be tested for HIV at least once in their lifetime.

We are asking you to help promote our routine HIV testing efforts and stop the spread of HIV/AIDS in your communities. Below are few talking points that you can use during your services to help us communicate this message.

- **Promote HIV testing.** Confidential HIV testing is available at every VA facility. Everyone should be tested for HIV at least once. Take control of your health, know your status.
- **Practice prevention.** Abstinence is the only 100% effective way to prevent the sexual transmission of HIV. When both partners are monogamous, the risk goes down. If you are sexually active, there are ways to protect yourself from getting infected. If you are infected, there are ways to prevent spreading the virus to others. Please talk to your health care providers about the best ways to keep yourself healthy. Share prevention messages that are appropriate and culturally sensitive.
- **Educate and inform.** HIV is no longer a death sentence. It is a treatable, chronic disease, and many HIV infected individuals are leading long healthy lives into their 80's and beyond.

Treatment can be as simple as one pill, once a day. But only those who know their status can benefit from life-saving treatment. Education and awareness are the most powerful weapons in the fight to reverse the devastating toll HIV/AIDS is having on our communities.

- **Practice tolerance.** Welcome people living with HIV/AIDS in your community. Work to overcome stigmas associated with HIV infection.
- **Practice compassion.** Embrace those who are disenfranchised and may put themselves at risk of acquiring HIV – including drug users, addicts, the homeless, and others that may be at risk.
- **Promote self-esteem and self-love** to help prevent destructive behaviors that put people in risky situations for contracting HIV. Remind them that their Creator loves them regardless of their health status.
- **Provide assistance to people with drug problems.** Drug abuse, particularly injection drug use, is directly linked to higher HIV infection rates. Support those who suffer from drug addiction as they seek help or encourage them to do so.
- **Inform people about new treatments.** New medications allow many people living with HIV to stay healthier longer. That is one reason why it is important to not put off getting tested for HIV. The sooner you know you are infected, the better your likelihood of leading a longer and healthier life. Do not wait until you are sick to get tested.
- **Provide emotional, mental, and spiritual support** to people living with HIV/AIDS and their families.
- **Pray for compassion and a cure.** There is no cure for HIV at present, although scientists are working hard to combat its effects. However, there are many life-saving treatments that can help people with HIV live very long lives – they can have families, get an education, and achieve success in their careers. So get tested for HIV. Remind them that communities of faith will journey with them as they take control of their life and their health.

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