

Rural AIDS Action Network Opens Moorhead Office, Expanding Outreach in Northwest Minnesota

More rural women and men are HIV positive - or at-risk - due to misconceptions

Little Falls, Minn. – Rural AIDS Action Network (RAAN), the nonprofit organization working to raise awareness and help prevent HIV/AIDS, and provide support for HIV/AIDS clients in rural Minnesota, will open a new office in Moorhead August 1, 2008.

The Moorhead office is the latest addition to the growing RAAN network of outreach centers operating in Little Falls, Mankato, Bemidji, Alexandria, Hibbing and Mora.

“RAAN is expanding its outreach in northwestern Minnesota due to the growth in the number of rural Minnesotans testing positive for HIV and those at significant risk of contracting the virus,” says RAAN executive director Charles Hempeck. “We know that medical outcomes can be better when rural clients have regular access to an infectious disease specialist,” he added.

The Moorhead office will be led by Northwest Regional Case Manager Pam Vetter, a social worker with extensive experience coordinating care and support for individuals who are living with HIV/AIDS. Vetter will be based at the new RAAN office located at 715 11th Street North, Suite 308 in Moorhead (701-287-6600).

“I’m delighted to be working with Rural AIDS Action Network. I believe in RAAN’s mission and vision; my colleagues and I are committed to providing the best care and case management services for clients in the Moorhead area,” Vetter said. “I also look forward to the professional relationships with the individuals and agencies that also work with our clientele. It is truly through each interaction, each teachable moment, that we can work on ending this epidemic,” she added.

The Medical Director for the Moorhead RAAN office is Dr. Augusto Alonto, an infectious disease specialist with the MeritCare Medical Group. “As a medical provider, I know that patient care will be more efficient and continuity of care will be easier to maintain with a local RAAN presence. It is definitely a big step towards better care for our patients and clients,” Dr. Alonto said.

Across rural Minnesota, more individuals, including a greater percentage of women and minorities are contracting the HIV virus, due in part to persistent misconceptions

Hempeck says there is a lack of understanding among the general population about who is at risk of HIV/AIDS. “Many people still believe this is a disease affecting only gay men. Others mistakenly believe AIDS is curable. In fact, anyone can be at risk depending on their lifestyle and behaviors. And quality of life is enhanced if HIV status is determined early through testing so the individual can get appropriate medical treatment,” Hempeck adds.

The latest rural Minnesota data indicates 29 percent of RAAN's clients are women, and more than one-third of the clients are people of color. 55 percent of RAAN's clients are below the federal poverty guidelines. And, as many clients are becoming infected with HIV through heterosexual sex (37%) as gay sexual contact (38%).

“In rural Minnesota, nearly 30 percent of individuals are unaware of their HIV infection, and they may be symptom-free for up to a decade, continuing to unknowingly infect others,” says Hemeck. “We’re asking at-risk men and women to take responsibility for their health and the health of others. Testing is quick, free, and confidential.”

To determine your risk factors for contracting HIV, please visit **www.raan.org**. RAAN has established a **toll-free hotline – 800-966-9735** – to schedule a free, confidential HIV test and to receive information about HIV prevention.

Persistent misconceptions about HIV/AIDS:

- ∞ AIDS is a ‘gay disease,’ affecting only homosexuals;
- ∞ the HIV virus is transmissible by mosquito bites;
- ∞ AIDS is curable;
- ∞ an infected person cannot pass on the virus if he/she is being treated;
- ∞ AIDS is only a problem in Africa;
- ∞ sterile needles remain sterile even after they’re removed from the packaging and shared with other injected drug abusers;
- ∞ the birth control pill offers protection from HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases; and, HIV-positive status is an immediate death sentence.

For more information about RAAN, please visit www.raan.org.

The Rural AIDS Action Network (RAAN) is a nonprofit, community-based organization whose mission is to organize, develop, and sustain caring communities of professionals and volunteers that serve and support persons living with, affected by, or at risk for HIV/AIDS in rural Minnesota.