

# HIV/AIDS a Growing Public Health Threat Across Rural Minnesota

## More women and minorities HIV positive, misconceptions persist

Little Falls, Minn. – Rural AIDS Action Network (RAAN), the nonprofit organization working to raise awareness and help prevent HIV/AIDS in Greater Minnesota, reports more women and minorities are contracting the HIV virus, fostered by misconceptions that persist 23 years after the HIV virus was first identified.

Across rural Minnesota, 29 percent of RAAN's clients are women, and more than one-third of the clients are people of color, including more African-born immigrants. And, as many clients are becoming infected with HIV through heterosexual sex (37%) as gay sexual contact (38%). Seven percent of clients believe they acquired the virus through injection drug use, according to the latest statistics.

Because of the growing, and increasingly diverse number of HIV/AIDS cases being seen, RAAN is expected to open two additional offices in southwestern and northwestern Minnesota during 2008. The organization, which serves all of rural Minnesota, maintains offices in Little Falls, Mankato, Bemidji, Alexandria, Hibbing and Mora.

“There continues to be a lack of understanding about who is at risk of HIV/AIDS. Many still believe this is a disease affecting only gay men. In fact, anyone can be at risk depending on their risk factors,” said RAAN Executive Director Charles Hempeck.

## Get Informed, Get Tested

“HIV/AIDS is not solely an urban issue either,” Hempeck adds. “Our message is get informed, and get tested. It's free and confidential. The public health threat from HIV is growing due to lack of public understanding about the virus. The insidious aspect of HIV is that many individuals are infected, yet remain unaware and symptom-free for years, unknowingly passing the virus along to others.”

RAAN has established a **toll-free number** for individuals with questions about HIV prevention and protection – 800-966-9735. Free, confidential HIV testing is available statewide.

## HIV/AIDS in Rural Minnesota

- ∞ An estimated 25-30 percent of HIV-positive Minnesotans do not know they are infected.
- ∞ Individuals can be HIV-positive for nearly 10 years or more, unaware, symptom-free, and spreading the virus to their sexual partners.
- ∞ Approximately 13 percent of Minnesota HIV/AIDS cases are in rural areas, compared with 8 percent nationally.

- ∞ 55 percent of RAAN's clients are below the federal poverty guidelines.

**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 and the comprehensive services it provides across rural Minnesota, please visit [www.raan.org](http://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.