

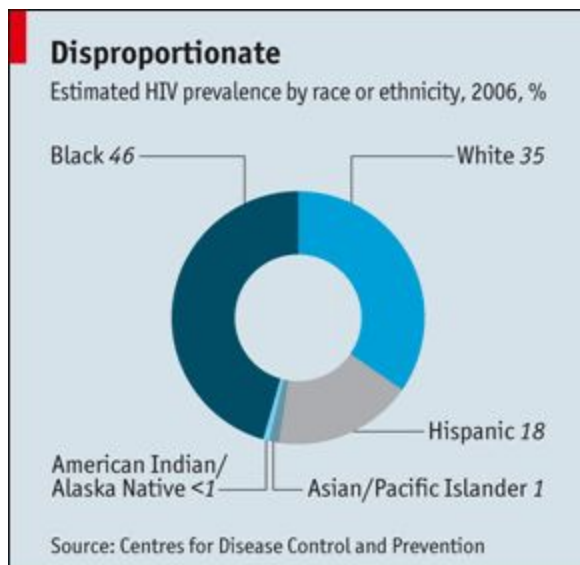
The Economist

HIV/AIDS: Altogether now

Enlisting business to fight HIV

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WHEN the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a federal agency, published its latest statistics on HIV in 2008, there was consternation: there were 40% more new HIV infections each year than had previously been thought. The survey also revealed that a fifth of Americans with HIV were unaware of it. One theory is that people have been lulled into a false sense of security about HIV because campaigns to publicise the condition have been scaled back and anti-retroviral drugs are more readily available.

For organisations such as the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, or GBC—which is based in America but works mostly in developing countries—the news that HIV was still on the march back home came as a wake-up call. The GBC has promoted the use of businesses in disease-prevention programmes in developing countries for the past decade, with great success. Its premise was that no government or NGO could ever hope to tackle HIV, tuberculosis or malaria on its own. Many now think that public-private partnerships should be used to revive counter-HIV efforts at home.

“Anyone who, in this day and age, thinks that HIV will be solved by government alone is clearly not grasping the scale of the problem,” says Shannon Hader, director for HIV/AIDS at the District of Columbia's department of health. Miss Hader was one of the first health officials to seize the opportunity to work with the GBC in America: 3.2% of adults and adolescents in the capital are infected with HIV, one of the highest rates in the country.

Since the majority of new HIV cases are linked to the behaviour of undiagnosed carriers of the virus, the GBC's efforts in America focus on testing and prevention campaigns, with a strong emphasis on the use of condoms. These had taken a back seat in favour of promoting abstinence during the Bush years.

In the District, Miss Hader's department was already planning a campaign to encourage doctors to offer HIV tests as part of routine health checks when the GBC suggested bringing in the sales force of Pfizer, a pharmaceutical giant. Pfizer does not produce HIV testing kits itself, but does sell many other drugs, which their sales representatives promote among the capital's health professionals. With their new “Offer the Test” programme, sales reps simply take a few minutes during their regular visits to explain the campaign. By tapping into Pfizer's network, DC's health department is benefiting from relationships that would have taken it years, not to mention thousands of dollars, to build.

John Tedstrom, the chief executive of the GBC, says that contributions in kind are not only more valuable to the recipient, they are often worth more than companies would want to write a cheque for. Corporations, he adds, can also bring the same appetite for success to their HIV response that they apply to their businesses.

Ron Dellums, the mayor of Oakland, California, agrees. On June 1st his administration launched a new strategy to include the business community in the city's existing HIV campaign, Get Screened Oakland (GSO). Oakland is one of the worst affected cities in America, thanks to large populations of high-risk groups such as Latinos, African-Americans and gay men.

Chevron, Walgreens, the Levi Strauss Foundation, Young & Rubicam and the city's basketball team, the Golden State Warriors, will all work alongside the GSO's public and non-profit partners to provide management skills, publicity, volunteers for community

programmes and training. “Companies are smart about marketing, campaigns, advertising, technical assistance and they bring all of this to GSO, as well as financial contributions,” the mayor explains.

Mr Dellums hopes that this new strategy, devised with the GBC and the CDC, will become a national model. His hopes aren't unreasonable: the GBC is providing findings from its member companies to the country's first national HIV/AIDS strategy and it has been consulted both at the White House and on Capitol Hill.

Getting the corporate sector involved makes sense. Companies, after all, need healthy employees and consumers. Promoting the health of local communities—Chevron's headquarters are just 15 minutes' drive from Oakland, for instance—might be as much about enlightened self-interest as it is philanthropy. As Mr Dellums puts it, “at the end of the day, HIV is everybody's business.”

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