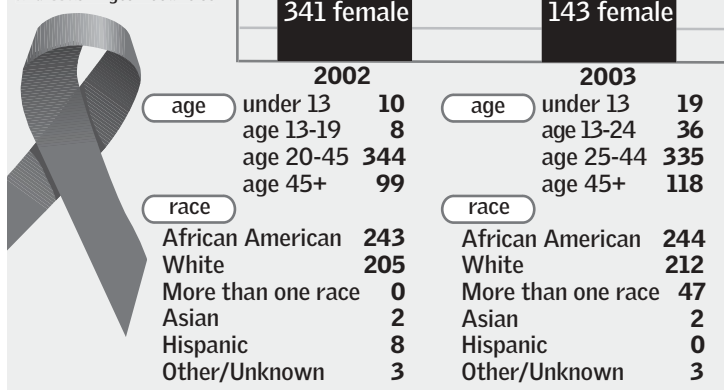


Complacency, carelessness fuel spread of AIDS in metro-east

Metro-east HIV/AIDS cases on the rise in 2003

Based on HIV/AIDS patients receiving treatment from the HIV Care Consortium encompassing: Bond, Clinton, Jersey, Madison, Monroe, St. Clair and Washington counties



Current HIV/AIDS cases in St. Louis metro area* (2002)	5,210
Current HIV/AIDS cases nationwide (2002)	886,595
New HIV infections reported in U.S. (2002)	43,136
New HIV infections reported worldwide	5 million
Projected number worldwide by 2025	250 million

*St. Louis, St. Louis County and 5 Illinois counties including St. Clair and Madison counties.

Sources: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention / HIV Care Consortium
JIM MOELLER / News-Democrat

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AIDS is a growing problem in the metro-east, where the HIV infection rate is up by 10 percent over last year.

Experts blame the increase on young people and others who have become complacent because of the success of new AIDS drugs, which have dramatically cut the number of deaths caused by AIDS since the mid-1990s.

"So people are still having unprotected sex. They're still sharing needles," said Karen Kunsemiller, who monitors HIV programs for St. Clair County. "Those are still the two main routes for transmission."

This is particularly true in the inner city, where the growing rate of infections among blacks is blamed on those who are engaging in such high-risk behaviors as intravenous drug use and prostitution, said Karla Scott, director of the African-American studies program at St. Louis University.

According to the HIV Care Consortium, which is overseen

by the St. Clair County Health Department, the number of black people infected last year in the metro-east was 244, compared with 205 for white people. Blacks make up about 20 percent of the area's population.

Nationally, HIV cases are growing at a rate 11 times higher for blacks than whites, according to the latest United Nations worldwide report on AIDS.

Another major factor stems from the high number of black men who acquire HIV in prison, Scott said.

"You have black men who come out of those facilities who come back into their communities. Some may not even know they are infected," she said.

People like Magic Johnson, the former NBA superstar who has been HIV positive for more than a decade, also add to the perception that AIDS is a manageable disease, said Sharon Smith, executive director of Bethany Place in Belleville, the metro-east's leading provider of support and housing services for peo-

ple with AIDS.

Johnson, who continues to lead an active lifestyle, is the spokesman in an aggressive marketing campaign for drug companies that make anti-AIDS drugs.

Many young people believe if they get infected with HIV, all they have to do is pop a pill, Smith said.

"And then we try to teach them about the pill, the side effects of the medication, that it's just as toxic and deadly as the disease," she said.

This complacency also is reflected in a recent spate of funding cuts in federal programs set up to help people with AIDS.

"People who got infected progressed quickly to AIDS and death. Now, it's a more chronic disease," Kunsemiller said.

"People in the federal government are saying, 'Why do we continue to provide all of these supportive services for people who are not dying? We don't provide the same level of services to people with cancer, muscular dystrophy, diabetes.'" Last year, the federally

funded Ryan White Title 1 Planning Council for St. Louis, which provides funding for AIDS programs in St. Clair, Madison and three other Illinois counties, saw its budget cut 14 percent, or about \$700,000.

Doorways, a St. Louis-based nonprofit group that lines up housing for people with HIV, lost another \$50,000 in funding from another federally funded program — Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS.

Earlier this month, that same federal agency cut \$80,000 in funding for Bethany Place's temporary residential housing program, but the Illinois Department of Public Health stepped in to keep Bethany Place's housing program open for another year.

"What's going to happen is you're going to find more and more individuals who are homeless," said DeWayne Sanders, manager of Doorways' Illinois program.

"It's just like most things. When funding cuts happen on one side, the demand increases in some other place."

PRAYER | AIDS serves as a 'thorn' that reminds minister to curtail activities that spread HIV

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part, he acknowledged.

"Because I think she deserves to be in a healthy relationship with a noninfected person," said Lawary, who recently reunited with her.

As for his AIDS, he calls it his "thorn."

A thorn "that reminds me where I came from," he said. "To help me curtail the sexual behavior that puts people at risk for HIV infection."

Life without drugs

In mid-August, Lawary lay in a hospital bed on the 12th floor of Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St.

Louis. He admitted himself the day before with severe chest pains.

"I'm in good hands," Lawary said wearily into a cell phone as Dorsey and another sister, Tammy Lawary, hovered around him.

Lawary felt weak and hungry. He hadn't eaten since the day before because his doctors wanted him to take a stress test that morning.

A nurse entered the room and pulled up a chair next to his bed. She unzipped a blue nylon bag and began showing him its contents: a set of small needles and a digital meter known as a glucometer that he must jab in-

to his fingers four times daily. Monitoring his blood sugar will become a daily ritual as he embarks on his new life as a Type 2 diabetic.

"You have to manage yourself," she said, "because you are the consumer."

Lawary rested the palms of his hands on top of his head, his face a mask of concentration as he digested the information.

"Don't worry," the nurse said. "This will come together the more you learn about it."

As for managing his AIDS, Lawary recounted to Dorsey a conversation he had earlier with one of the hospital's doctors.

"He said, 'You got to go back

on your AIDS meds,'" Lawary said. "I said, 'Excuse me?'"

"He said, 'You'll die without them,'" Lawary said.

He let this sink in, looking at his sister's face to gauge her reaction. Neither said anything for a few seconds.

"I'm staying off them," he said.

Making the most out of life

Ten days later, Lawary sat on an examination table in his doctor's office. The two men chatted amiably, a byproduct of a friendship that goes back a decade.

Wethers, the doctor, took

Lawary's blood pressure, checked his pulse and listened to his heartbeat through a stethoscope. Then they talked about Lawary's blood sugar levels, which they both agreed were still too high. But otherwise he was adapting well to his new life as a diabetic.

Wethers pulled out a manila folder. Inside was a chart showing the results of blood tests Lawary had taken in July.

Smiling, Wethers pointed to a line on the chart: Lawary's CD4 count, a key benchmark of his immune system's robustness, had actually gone up.

"So it's up from 153 to 228 right now," Lawary said.

"Essentially stable over the last four years," Wethers said.

Lawary said he wasn't surprised.

"I know my body," he said.

"Your body knows you, too," Wethers said. "It likes the care you're giving it."

Later, as he walked to the medical building parking lot, Lawary tried to sum up how his religious faith linked up with his refusal to take anti-AIDS drugs.

"I'm not saying I expect to live forever," Lawary said. "What I am saying is I want to make the most of the time God has given me."