

Article in El Diario re: Harlem United's Blocks Project

Published on January 27, 2008 (translated from the original Spanish by Harlem United)

They are numbers that demonstrate a terrifying reality.

One of 100 persons in NYC is infected with HIV. But in East and Central Harlem, the number is just over 1 in 37.

"It's unacceptable," said Borough President Scott Stringer. "No one should be more exposed to HIV because they live in East Harlem than those on beautiful Park Avenue.

And the Latinos of East Harlem, also known as El Barrio, live in the zone where more people die from AIDS than in any part of New York. The figures are not new; but the politicians and community leaders meeting yesterday in the community room of Dewitt Clinton on 110th Street announced that they are putting an end to it.

The activists said that staff of Harlem United Community AIDS Center, Inc., will knock on every door of every apartment in the area's housing developments to ask all residents to take the HIV test. Those accepting the offer will take the oral fluid exam in the organization's mobile unit, and there they will be asked about other conditions and be offered medical assistance.

"It's an innovative program, said Councilwoman Melissa Mark Viverito of East Harlem. The information will come directly to the residents. Many residents believe the virus doesn't affect them."

The project is called "Blocks," and begins now, financed with \$175,000 a year from a private foundation.

The difference with other HIV prevention projects is that Blocks will help not only homosexuals or drug addicts, but all people who do not fit into a high-risk category, said the activists.

For Carmen Collazo, a 59-year-old HIV-infected Latina, the program is essential. Ms. Collazo tested positive on an HIV test she took in 1991 in the Bronx, and she had to give up her heroin addiction.

"It was hard. I had to choose between dying or living. I chose to live," said Ms. Collazo, who lives in East Harlem. "Today I'm well. I take my medication each day and I don't drink anything, not even coffee."

The Latina, working for Harlem United, dedicates herself to sharing her experiences with other Latinos in the zone.

"I give them hope," she added.

2.6% of the residents of East and Central Harlem live with HIV. The rate of death among people with HIV/AIDS in this area is 32.6 for every 1,000 persons with HIV.

Patrick McGovern, Executive Director of Harlem United, said yesterday that the HIV virus is a community problem that requires a community response and a new mentality.

"Everyone is at risk for HIV," said Mr. McGovern. "We have to be tested for HIV the same way we test for diabetes or cholesterol."