



Florida

Project Title: *Sistas Organizing to Survive (SOS)*

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Description

Through an annual conference and community outreach, SOS is a grassroots mobilization initiative that aims to educate black women about the impact of HIV/AIDS and to prevent the further spread of HIV/AIDS and other diseases in Florida's black communities.

Objectives

- Educate black women about HIV/AIDS and how other STDs, hepatitis and substance abuse increase their risk;
- Empower black women to take charge of and control of their sexual health;
- Connect black women to HIV/AIDS resources;
- Offer tools to enable black women to educate others where they live, work, play and worship;
- Encourage black women to take a pledge to get tested for HIV and to educate others where they live, work, play, and worship.

Goal

- The goal of the SOS initiative is to test 100,000 black women each year by 2010 with hopes to continue to expand the initiative.

Partners

The SOS initiative incorporates an intricate web of partners throughout the state of Florida. The lead planning committee consisted of Florida Department of Health staff members. An advisory group was created after the initial conference and consists of individuals from various faith-based organizations, community based organizations, local historically black colleges and universities, and local community members to name a few. A key element to the partners involved in SOS is that the advisory group membership is comprised of individuals that represent the target population- black women. The participation of black women in this targeted initiative creates a sense of ownership amongst participants and encourages their continued commitment.

Background

In Florida, one in 68 non-Hispanic black women are known to be living with HIV/AIDS. This compares with approximately one in 1,281 non-Hispanic white women, and one in 472 Hispanic women. For over 16 years, HIV/AIDS has been the leading cause of death among black women aged 25-44 years in Florida. Responding to the growing epidemic, a team of health department staff met to discuss possible initiatives to prevent the spread of the virus amongst black women in their communities. Previous initiatives targeting the black community as a whole were already in place in the state of Florida; therefore, given the statistics developing tools to target a certain sector of that population presented a natural next step. The health department team decided that Florida's response to this crisis was to create an initiative that would mobilize black women to take charge of their sexual health, get tested for HIV, and encourage other black women to get tested.

Approach

In 2008, a profile highlighting the state of HIV/AIDS among women in the state of Florida was developed. The data compiled from the profile was used to garner support from health department staff and community groups. Statewide meetings were held to encourage partnership. SOS was presented as a statewide mobilizations initiative facilitated through an annual conference. With the state health department as a leading champion of SOS, various media outlets were utilized to spread the word about the black women's initiative.

The SOS initiative was launched on June 20, 2008 in Orlando, Florida, during the *SOS Conference*. Over 600 consumers, health providers, and community leaders participated in the conference during the weekend event. The conference begins with a viewing of a video prepared by the health department highlighting the perspectives of HIV positive black women in Florida and facts on the current impact of the epidemic on black women. Participants discuss the video and the epidemiological data on HIV and black women. Breakout sessions

on topics such as faith, corrections, and youth provide a smaller more intimate setting for participants to discuss and share information. The conference also consists of presentations on best practices and mobilization to help inform the participants on effective strategies to reach women in their communities. At the close of the conference participants are asked to take the pledge to get tested and encourage other black women to get tested.

Since 2008, this grassroots mobilization initiative has reached thousands of black women through local SOS conferences, testing initiatives, online pledges, and community activities. What makes the SOS initiative so successful? It has mobilized black women in the community to schedule activities and to talk about HIV/AIDS where they live, work, play, and worship. The pledge is an integral part of the SOS initiative. Encouraging black women to actively engage other black women on the importance of getting tested creates a sense of community, sisterhood, and ownership. As mentioned, the goal of SOS is to test 100,000 black women each year by 2010. In 2008 the initiative managed to get over 80,000 black women tested. That number increased to over 90,000 black women in 2009, and they are expected to reach their goal of 100,000 by 2010.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Through thorough planning and full support from the state health office the SOS initiative managed to avoid any major challenges. When interviewed the lead health department team identified funding as an obstacle at times. Despite the interest of local and regional organizations to mobilize their communities, limited available funding presented a challenge. The health department provided the necessary materials (brochures, pledge cards, etc.) for the events, and local and regional organizations were encouraged to seek external funding. Health department staff visit local events and conferences to provide materials and resources. By remaining visible, health department staff participation helps boost morale and keep the momentum of the SOS initiative.

To maintain the success of the program the annual conference has transitioned into an annual meeting framework where participants can discuss challenges and lessons learned from local and regional events.

The Way Forward

Understanding that in order to protect HIV infection amongst black women you must include black men, the Florida Department of Health plans to expand their initiative involving the black community and include black men. At the 2008 SOS Conference, women asserted that there is a need for black men to participate in future conferences.

This June, the Florida Department of Health will host their second Sistas Organizing to Survive Conference.

Along with conference participation, there are plans to develop a male focused initiative that works to encourage men to take responsibility for their sexual actions.

Resources:

<http://www.wemakethechange.com/english/sos/index.htm>