

5 senses • 4 HIV Spikes in Yavapai: Why Is No One Talking?

By Ed Mickens

The headline in *The Arizona Republic* in September startled more than a few: “Yavapai County investigating spike in new HIV cases.”

The story reported “nearly triple the yearly average” of HIV diagnoses — specifically, 25 new cases in the first eight months of this year.

“We’re used to seeing an average of seven to nine cases per year,” says Laurie Silver, executive director of Northland Cares, the only clinic in Yavapai County devoted exclusively to HIV and AIDS care. “Now we’re seeing more patients and have had to expand our clinic hours.”

In fact, the numbers for 2019 have turned out far worse than originally reported. As of early October the number of new cases had grown to 33, according to Leslie Horton, director of Yavapai County Community Health Services. While the number needs to be confirmed, she estimates that about half of these are people moving into the county with the preexisting condition; they show up in the count as they register for care. But that means 16-17 new infections, just three-fourths into the year.

“We didn’t see the spike coming,” says Horton. “The state suspected something around March, but didn’t tell us. We didn’t see the actual numbers locally until July and August.”

Far worse, the incidence of new infections is skewing younger. Where in the early 2000s half the new cases were among people aged 30-50, the growing majority is now under 30.

“This is alarming and concerning,” Horton says, “especially because HIV is so preventable today.”

Of course, she’s talking about PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis), often marketed as Truvada, the two-drug cocktail that since 2012 has revolutionized AIDS prevention. While not a vaccine, a daily PrEP regimen can provide resistance up to 99% effective against contracting HIV if exposed.

It’s become almost standard advice in many of the big cities where

AIDS hit hard that anyone at risk of contracting the virus (predominantly men who have sex with men, and intravenous drug users) start taking PrEP. (The New York City health department launched an aggressive ad campaign a few years ago, aimed at young gay men.) But there’s a basic requirement before anyone can start: you have to be HIV-negative. That is, you need to know your status. You need to get tested.

Yavapai County isn’t likely to run posters featuring happy, carefree gay men, but it has been making an effort to make testing easier. “Everyone needs to get tested,” says Director Horton, and she touts the county’s free testing sites in Prescott, Prescott Valley, Cottonwood and Chino Valley. Call 928-634-6851 for more information.

Aunt Rita’s Foundation, a Phoenix-based AIDS philanthropy, has launched a statewide initiative offering free, 20-minute tests through Walgreens and Safeway stores across Arizona. (Should these rapid tests yield a positive, the recipient is given a voucher for a follow-up, confirmatory test at Sonora Quest Labs.) Unfortunately, no Walgreens in Yavapai has elected to participate, and only one Safeway, in Prescott Valley. Free vouchers are also available through GetTestedAZ.org, or by calling the HIVAZ Connect hotline at 602-903-1221.

And then there’s Northland Cares, which has offered free, confidential testing since its inception. Its Prescott clinic offers a wide range of HIV-related services, often free, including specialized medical care (even if it has to bring doctors in from Flagstaff and Phoenix). And it offers a relentless outreach program, with its professional teams bringing education and testing to colleges, drug treatment facilities, and healthcare centers.



The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 40% of people who have HIV don't know it — and concludes that they will be the most likely sources for spreading the virus in the near future. The Trump administration has budgeted \$291 million to “end the HIV epidemic in the US within ten years.” Nearly all that money (granted, a hundred-mill short of what it takes to pressure a foreign government) will be spent in 50 hard-hit counties, mostly urban. Maricopa County is one. Yavapai is not.

Meanwhile, health officials are beginning to worry that a new upsurge in HIV and AIDS could occur, this time in the rural parts of the nation. Some cite a lack of reliable information (“no promo homo?”). Some fear a side-effect of the opioid crisis (outlawed needle-exchange efforts?). But nearly all point to the same problem that has burdened this epidemic since it began.

“Stigma,” says Laurie Silver of Northland. “Stigma is still the biggest obstacle. Its hard to talk about HIV with potential donors, or even within the medical community.” Leslie Horton agrees, “We need to encourage talk about choices, and not be afraid.”

Otherwise we could find ourselves echoing the darkest wit from the early years of the epidemic, talking about friends who “died of embarrassment.”

Ed Mickens is managing editor of *5senses*.



All are welcome as we celebrate the life of **BILL TRACY**, past owner of The Dinner Bell and founder of Bill's Grill and Bill's Pizza in Prescott and Palm Springs. Food, friends and fond memories will be shared as we remember Bill and the place he held in our hearts and lives.

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Sunday, November 10, 1-3 pm
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Please RSVP to nikkicheck12@gmail.com



Northland Cares HIV Specialty Care Clinic

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