

Report shows HIV testing level high in Coachella Valley

Written by Nicole C. Brambila

A larger percentage of Coachella Valley residents are tested for HIV than across the United States, according to a new local health report.

In the valley, 47 percent have been screened for HIV, according to the “Community Health Monitor for the Coachella Valley,” released this month.

In comparison, 39.5 percent of Americans had received HIV testing, according to the 2010 National Health Interview Survey required by Congress.

The local finding is among more than 150 issues addressed in the first-of-its kind report specific to the Coachella Valley.

Among other findings:

51 percent of valley residents are married; 23 percent have never been married.

A little more than 10 percent identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender; 87 percent are heterosexual.

One in 10 valley children are forced to skip a meal because of food costs, and nearly a quarter of those do so every month.

In 2010, 53 percent of the valley's children were overweight or obese.

The report was conducted by the nonprofit Health Assessment Resource Center based in Palm Desert.

HARC provides data that nonprofit organizations and other agencies use to find funding.

Generally, health data are collected at the county and state level, making the Coachella Valley report especially important.

“If we can't have specific numbers, it doesn't do any good,” said Christy Porter, executive director of Hidden Harvest in Coachella, which hires farm workers to pick leftover produce for the needy. “It's invaluable.”

Desert AIDS Project, based in Palm Springs, has hired HARC to also collect data specific to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in the valley.

That information has been used to show a greater need for free HIV testing, given the area's high gay population.

“It's been very helpful in building a compelling case in our federal applications” for funding, said David Brinkman, Desert AIDS Project executive director.

Terry Comeaux of Cathedral City has been helped by extra funding spurred by the local data.

He's been able to live 20 years with HIV, something he could never have dreamed of at the height of the epidemic in San Francisco in the 1980s.

Comeaux, who works part time as a hair stylist, receives about \$1,300 worth of antiviral medications through DAP programs. He's been a client since moving to the desert 16 years ago.

“How can you get insurance with HIV?” said Comeaux, 60. “If you're gonna have HIV, this is the place to have it.”