



NEW INITIATIVE TACKLES HEPATITIS C THREAT

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"Just living is risky enough - get tested for Hep C!" A consortium of Piedmont health agencies is taking its message to the streets of Durham and beyond, to educate the public about Hepatitis C, which affects more than four million people in the U.S.

A public service campaign in October and November will promote Hepatitis C testing in a six-county area (Durham, Person, Warren, Vance, Granville and Franklin). The radio spots, bus advertisements and mailings were created as part of a federally funded program to develop programs that help overcome barriers to testing, treatment and prevention.

PHICAS, the Piedmont HIV Integrated Community Access System, received a three-year grant to develop education and community programs. Eight local agencies, including county health departments, are collaborating in the project.

"Our primary purpose is to address the problem of co-infection with Hepatitis C and HIV," said PHICAS project director Patrick Lee. "As we began working together, we realized that Hepatitis C itself is a growing public health threat. We want to use this public service campaign to reach the large number of people who are possibly risk for Hep C."

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by a virus. It is transmitted by direct blood-to-blood contact. The virus can linger in the body for decades, undiagnosed until the effects of liver damage become overwhelming. It can be spread by tattooing or piercing with unsterile needles, by sharing drug paraphernalia, and even sharing personal items like toothbrushes or nail clippers which might have come into contact with blood.

"Everyone should ask their healthcare provider about getting tested," Lee said. "For those who have HIV or who are at risk for it, it's absolutely necessary. Both viruses are harder to treat if you're co-infected, and HIV medications might not work as well. Liver disease is a leading cause of hospitalization and death for people with HIV and AIDS." He added that there are medication combinations and therapies to treat the diseases in tandem.

PHICAS partners offer post-test programs, including peer counseling and clinic referrals. "If someone's positive for Hep C, then we can refer them to treatment, and make sure they know how to avoid infecting other people. If they're negative, then they need to understand how they can keep from getting Hep C," Lee said.

Information and resources will be available in October on a new website, www.phicas.org