

Faith leaders in South LA join the fight against high STD rates

LOS ANGELES—Los Angeles County residents continue to experience the impact of sexually transmitted disease (STD) infection, with some areas and populations within the County disproportionately affected. The 2nd Supervisorial District, which includes South LA, Compton, and Inglewood, has approximately 1/3 of all gonorrhea and chlamydia cases in Los Angeles County, with African American and Latino youth and young adults ages 12-24 most affected. To help reduce STDs and their long-term impact, a coalition of community service providers, advocates, faith leaders, and residents have joined forces in a movement known as WeCanStopSTDsLA, championed by 2nd District Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas.

WeCanStopSTDsLA recently held a Circle of Faith breakfast where political and faith leaders voiced their support for community-wide engagement to fight the problem and increase healthy behavior.

“Chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis are on the rise for the third straight year in a row in LA County,” said guest speaker Sebastian Ridley-Thomas, California State Assembly Member, 54th District. “Having an STD affects not only school performance and success, but also leads to infertility, facilitates HIV transmission and stigmatizes entire communities of Americans. Because STDs also affect violence, homelessness and mental illness, this crisis requires us all to join together for a community response.”

Growing evidence suggests that the most effective interventions to reduce STDs involve a community response. At Greater Starlight Missionary Baptist Church, Pastor Prentiss Lewis understands the importance of talking about issues that affect quality of life.

“There is still a lot of fear when it comes to talking about sex, particularly in the faith community,” he said at the Circle of Faith breakfast. “But I’ve noticed a big change in my congregation because I encourage communication at home within the family structure to address a holistic approach to health. There is less stigma and more willingness to engage in health and well-being. By talking about it, we enhance awareness, knowledge and support for young people.” Faith leaders like Pastor Lewis have an enormous influence on their communities and can play a valuable role in providing a supportive environment for young people to understand the risks, take steps to protect themselves and have adult allies willing to discuss their concerns.

Anissa Michele Muhammad agrees. As a regional student coordinator with the Ministry of Health and Human Services for the Nation of Islam, she knows the faith community can help build stronger, healthier lives for everyone, including youth and young adults and those at elevated risk. “Each place of worship has a common desire to uphold and ensure the health and well-being of the young people, families and communities they serve. This common



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ground allows us to equip and strengthen youth and young adults for the long haul while upholding our spiritual beliefs and practices.”

By educating, equipping, empowering and engaging everyone in the community, youth and young adults can find a more supportive environment to live healthy lives.

WeCanStopSTDsLA is a movement that brings together people and organizations who live, work, serve, and worship in the South Los Angeles area of LA County’s Supervisorial District 2, with the goal of reducing the high rates and numbers of STDs in our communities.

Next year, WeCanStopSTDsLA will co-host the fifth annual Spring into Love Healthy Teen Summit, on Thursday, April 13, 2017 in Los Angeles, California. Spring into Love is a youth-led summit focused on bringing youth together to talk about issues related to their health while empowering them to make positive choices for their sexual and reproductive health. Spring into Love brings together young people from local organizations and groups to design, and lead workshops and presentations for youth (14-19 years) in District 2 and South Los Angeles.

Learn more at www.WeCanStopSTDsLA.org. For more information, contact:

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