

## Project releases results of youth survey on AIDS

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Kirk Williams nodded knowingly through Thursday's presentation of the results of a citywide youth survey on AIDS.

Two-thirds of the Hartford teenagers surveyed said they don't trust condoms as a way of protecting them against AIDS. Fewer than half of those claiming to be sexually active said they use condoms consistently. And nearly 60 percent said they believe that everyone infected with HIV has visible symptoms.

The results weren't news to Williams, a health educator for the city's Youth Project, an AIDS prevention program targeting teenagers. He has heard teens say that only gay men and drug users get AIDS, and that young people can't get it. He knows that most teenagers get their information from their peers, not from medical professionals or teachers.

Still, to see the survey results in black and white Thursday, flashed on a screen at the Hispanic Health Council offices, was unsettling.

"A lot of the information, we already know," he said. "But

when you look at it, you realize how much work there is to be done."

The Hispanic Health Council and seven other agencies participate in the Youth Project, which conducted the survey. The agencies already have incorporated the survey findings into the curriculum of the project, which provides counseling on AIDS prevention, conflict-resolution, health and sexuality. The agencies hope the project will serve as a model for other prevention programs.

Many of the 247 Hartford youths, ages 12 to 19, who partici-

pated in the survey are considered likely to engage in at-risk behavior.

"The lack of accurate information about HIV and the level of risk-taking behaviors are alarming," said Laurie Novick Sylla, executive director of the Greater Hartford HIV Action Initiative.

"We have an obligation to protect these children from life-threatening illness, regardless of how we feel about them" engaging in sex.

Sixty percent of those surveyed

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are Hispanic; 11 percent are white non-Hispanics; and 29 percent are African-American or Jamaican.

Nearly half reported having friends or relatives who have been diagnosed with the human immunodeficiency virus or AIDS. More than 80 percent said they consider AIDS an important concern, while three-quarters said they want to learn more about AIDS.

"The good news is we have a receptive audience here. We have a real opportunity to do effective intervention," Sylla said.

But the widespread distrust of condoms is a major concern, she and other health educators said. The survey found that only 16 percent of teenagers learned about HIV and AIDS from schools, health-care providers or other reliable sources.

"Parents, clergy, youth program leaders and teachers all need to become knowledgeable about AIDS and then discuss it," Sylla said.

More than 60 percent of the teens surveyed said they are sexually active, and one-quarter of teens ages 12 to 15 said they had engaged in sex with multiple partners.

About one-quarter said they drink alcohol, while 9 percent said they drink and use drugs.

"This is a population for whom saying, 'Just don't do it' is not going to do anything, because they've already done it," Sylla said. She said prevention efforts need to go beyond distributing information, to reinforcing behaviors that reduce risks.

There were 1,697 reported cases of AIDS in Hartford as of Sept. 1, according to the state health department. That figure is cumulative; about half of those people have died of the disease.

People in their 20s make up about 16 percent of the city's reported AIDS cases, said Merrill Singer, deputy director of the Hispanic Health Council.

"That suggests to us that we have a fair amount of risk behavior going on" among teenagers, he said.