

PREVENTING HIV TRANSMISSION: AN UPDATE ON THE TOPWA PROGRAM

Of the estimated 39.4 million people worldwide living with HIV in 2004, 17.6 million (45%) were women. Women are most severely affected by AIDS in places where heterosexual contact is the dominant mode of transmission. According to the World Health Organization, most women become infected through their partner's high-risk behavior, which they have little or no control over¹.

In Florida, women accounted for 31% of reported HIV/AIDS cases in 2004. Of the 1,391 HIV/AIDS cases reported among women of childbearing age (15-44 years of age) in 2004, 9% (125) were among injecting drug users, and 90% (1,252) were acquired through heterosexual contact. An HIV-infected pregnant woman can transmit the virus to her infant during pregnancy, at labor or delivery, or through breastfeeding. Medical treatment is available that can reduce the risk of perinatal (mother to child) HIV transmission from approximately 30% to less than two percent.

Florida has made great strides in reducing pediatric HIV/AIDS (cases reported in children less than 13 years of age). As the vast majority of pediatric HIV/AIDS cases (96 percent) were perinatally acquired, the Department of Health has focused on educating women and health care providers on the importance of HIV testing for pregnant women and the availability of treatment to prevent perinatal transmission. As a result, there has been a 93% reduction in perinatal HIV/AIDS cases born in Florida since 1992.

In 1999, the Targeted Outreach for Pregnant Women Act (TOPWA) program was established to find pregnant women at risk for delivering an HIV-infected or substance-exposed infant who are not receiving adequate prenatal care and link them with services. The program is currently provided by twelve community-based organizations in twelve Florida counties. Providers conduct street outreach in high-risk neighborhoods and also work with clinics, domestic violence shelters, substance abuse centers, immigrant centers, Healthy Start, WIC, and other health and social service agencies to access the target population and effectively link them with services.

In addition to linking all pregnant women to prenatal care, the TOPWA program works to ensure that HIV-positive participants are educated about the use of antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus to their infants. HIV-infected women are then linked to healthcare programs that can provide treatment before and at the time of delivery. Between January and April 2005, 16 of the 19 HIV-positive women in the program had delivered their babies, with only 1 infant (6%) reported to be HIV infected.

Figure 1. Proportion of Women Screened and Enrolled by Race/Ethnicity, 1999-2005

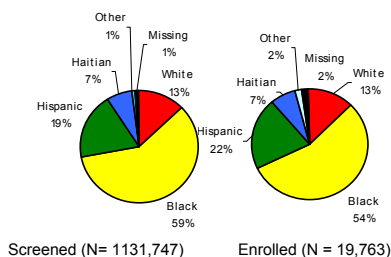


Figure 1 shows the race/ethnicity of women screened for and enrolled in the TOPWA program. Data reflect the emphasis on minority women in response to the high numbers of non-white women becoming infected with HIV in Florida. Additional TOPWA data (not shown) indicate that 52% of enrolled women had less than a high school education, 85% had an annual income of less than \$10,000, and 68% were unemployed at the time of assessment. Low levels of education and employment skills place women at a disadvantage and at risk. Consequently, many TOPWA providers actively assist clients in enrolling in GED and skill training programs.

TOPWA providers have conducted close to 26,000 on-site pregnancy tests identifying over 5,800 pregnant women. Of enrolled women, 42% were not in prenatal care at the time of assessment. Figure 2 shows reasons given by TOPWA clients for not receiving adequate prenatal care (clients had the option to choose more than one category).

Table 1 shows by county the number of women tested for HIV, the number of women tested positive and the seropositivity rate. TOPWA providers have conducted over 15,000 HIV tests, with a seropositivity rate of 1.8%. 28.6 percent of the women found to be HIV infected were pregnant at the time of testing. Over 19% of enrolled pregnant women and 35% of screened women had not previously been tested for HIV.

In addition to conducting community outreach, three TOPWA agencies are also funded to provide services in their local county jail, and several other agencies have strong linkages in place to offer HIV and pregnancy testing to female inmates and receive referrals of pregnant women upon their release. Incarcerated women are at high risk for HIV infection and poor pregnancy outcomes, and this is reflected in the TOPWA data. Thirty six percent of the 616 pregnant women enrolled in the funded jail programs had not received prior prenatal care, and 46% were using substances at the time of their arrest, with one quarter of those using crack cocaine. HIV testing conducted at the jails has so far identified 78 HIV-infected women.

The TOPWA program has been successful at reaching pregnant women at risk for HIV and helping them to deliver healthy infants in Florida. It has filled a void for pregnant women in Florida's high-risk communities by addressing the underlying issues that place women at risk.

Figure 2. Reasons for No/Inadequate Prenatal Care Among Women Enrolled in TOPWA, 1999-2005 (N = 19,763)

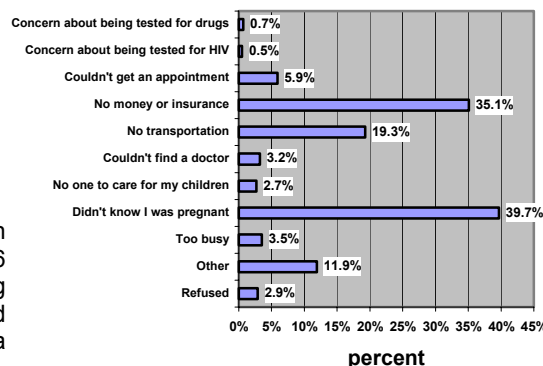


Table 1. Number Tested for HIV and Positivity Rates by TOPWA Counties, 1999-2005

| County | Total Tested | Total Positive | % HIV Positive |
|------------------------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| Broward | 958 | 21 | 2.2 |
| Duval | 348 | 5 | 1.4 |
| Hillsborough | 1,817 | 19 | 1.0 |
| Lee, Collier, Hendry, Glades | 1,353 | 11 | 0.8 |
| Miami-Dade | 3,358 | 92 | 2.7 |
| Orange | 4,259 | 47 | 1.1 |
| Palm Beach | 1,977 | 63 | 3.2 |
| Pinellas | 11 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Saint Lucie | 1,343 | 22 | 1.6 |
| Total | 15,424 | 280 | 1.8 |

1/ http://www.doh.state.fl.us/disease_ctrl/aids/updates/facts/BW04Women.pdf

For additional information about these HIV data, contact Leticia Hernandez, MS, Nita Harrelle, or Marlene LaLota, MPH, at (850) 245-4424 or SunCom 205-4424, or visit our website at www.doh.state.fl.us.