

February 13, 2008 2:52AM

Women with AIDS grow in number

Health grant targets need for preventive information

By Lisa D. Welsh TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER— Standing next to 45-year-old Rosa DeJesus or 51-year-old Brunilda Rodriguez, you wouldn't know they are among a growing population in Worcester.

Rosa DeJesus, a client of AIDS Project Worcester, was HIV positive for 17 years before being diagnosed with AIDS in 2001. (T&G Staff/TOM RETTIG)

They are women with AIDS.

What's more, both women were in long-term and, what they believed to be, monogamous relationships when the AIDS virus was transmitted to them.

"Most of these women are women of color, and they are becoming infected through sexual violence, often by men with whom they are having a relationship and with men who know that they are infected," said Janice B. Yost, president and CEO of the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts Inc. "This is a woman's worst nightmare, to be sexually violated by someone we think cares for us, and to end up with HIV as a result."

To prevent that, the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts announced a grant of \$270,400 to pilot the "Women's HIV/Sexual Violence Initiative." It is a collaboration of AIDS Project Worcester, the YWCA's Daybreak program, Family Health Center, the Rape Crisis Center, Pernet Family Health Service Inc., and the American Red Cross of Central Massachusetts. The grant was outlined yesterday during a press conference at AIDS Project Worcester.

Based on the success of the pilot project, the foundation anticipates providing additional funding in the range of \$1 million for the project over three to five years.

Ms. DeJesus was HIV positive for 17 years before being diagnosed with AIDS in 2001. She said there were rumors that her boyfriend of three years had started going out on her, but she didn't take the rumors seriously until the other woman, a drug user, died of AIDS.

"I felt emotionally betrayed, but I was also very sick," Ms. DeJesus said through interpreter Jarge Guzman, a peer program coordinator at AIDS Project Worcester. "When he left me, my full mental state was very ugly."

Although she acknowledges she never talked about AIDS before she was diagnosed, she now talks about it with everyone, including her seven children, ages 18 to 30.

"It's taboo to speak about drug use and sex," Ms. DeJesus said. "But I want people to know they need to communicate more. Know your partner's status and be tested."

Mrs. Rodriguez has had AIDS for 11 years and believes it was transmitted after she and her husband reunited after a period of separation.

"My husband used to say he felt sick, but he didn't know what caused it," said Mrs. Rodriguez, through interpreter Guzman. She acknowledges that initially she was more concerned for her husband and other family members than she was for herself, but as a client at AIDS Project Worcester, she has learned to take care of herself.

"There was a lot of misinformation, throughout the Great Brook Valley community where we lived," she said. "My son heard that he could get AIDS through microwaved cabbage. So, I told him our story and educated him."

Access to accurate information is the primary goal of the Women's HIV/Sexual Violence Initiative. Through it, a language and culturally appropriate, self-administered screening survey will be widely distributed to places frequented by women, such as hair and nail salons, laundromats, faith communities, neighborhood centers, social service providers and MySpace.com.

During the press conference, City Councilor Gary Rosen, chairman of the council's Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, announced that he had submitted two orders to last night's City Council meeting to review what the city of Worcester is doing in light of the fact that the city leads the state in the percentage of women diagnosed with AIDS; and to investigate ways in which Worcester can offer through public and private partnerships, additional, effective and low-cost treatment to those people whose lives have been ravaged by drug addiction.

"AIDS Project Worcester is one of the best agencies in Worcester and Central Massachusetts, and with public and private partnerships, we can help cut down the instances of AIDS in the city," he said.

Joseph D. McKee, executive director of AIDS Project Worcester, welcomes the help.

"What is happening with this collaborative — with the Health Foundation, the government officials and city officials — it feels more supportive," Mr. McKee said after yesterday's announcement. "It feels like a lot of the things that we've been advocating all along are now being supported."

"We've been advocating for a number of years, to make (people) aware of what was happening, with limited success," he continued. "Some of the most vulnerable of society are unnecessarily sick. This is 100 percent completely preventable. But unbeknownst to them, they have been infected and it's been several to 10 years they've had the disease without care. That's a tragedy. We know, the earlier the diagnosis, the better outcome."