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APW assesses HIV risk factors

Women's Initiative targets need

By Lisa D. Welsh TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — Akua A. Nti will never forget her 22nd birthday.

Not because of the usual celebratory reasons, she said, but because it was the night she was sexually violated by a longtime family friend.

Last April, the Quinsigamond Community College nursing student was out with a girlfriend at a local pub where Ms. Nti said she had too many drinks. After closing time, the two friends went to a male friend's home and Ms. Nti fell asleep.

"When I woke up at 4:30 a.m. she was gone, I was in his bed, my panties were on the floor ..." said Ms. Nti. She later reported what had happened to police and authorities advised her to get an HIV test, which came back negative. During the screening process at AIDS Project Worcester, Mickie DiRoberto, The Women's HIV/Sexual Violence Initiative coordinator, opened the door for a discussion and an opportunity for Ms. Nti to receive support services from The Women's Initiative, although she is not HIV positive and does not have AIDS.

"I told my family about what had happened and they were mad at me for putting myself in that situation," said Ms. Nti.

"I tried to deal with it myself. I kept thinking, 'But he knew my family,' " she said, her voice trailing off.

Sexual violence is one of the reasons that Worcester ranks first in the state for the highest percentage of women who have been diagnosed with AIDS, according to AIDS Project Worcester. Two years ago, the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts funded a planning grant and pilot program for The Women's Initiative for AIDS Project Worcester to identify why women, particularly women of color, were increasingly contracting HIV as a result of intimate-partner violence.

The pilot provided 567 women with information, education, assessment, support and referrals to appropriate agencies.

"Sixty-five percent of those women had self-identified one or more risk factors for HIV or sexual violence," said Joe McKee, APW's executive director. "The biggest surprise to the staff was that there were so many at-risk factors or potential HIV exposures at area colleges."

The pilot program was completed in December and data was evaluated by an independent auditor that found the work worthy of another Health Foundation grant of \$252,153 to fully implement The Women's Initiative here and to develop similar programs throughout the state. In total, the Health Foundation has provided \$620,089 to The Women's Initiative.

The goals of the project are to increase the identification of undiagnosed cases of HIV/AIDS; increase the identification of women with histories of sexual violence; increase access to medical care and treatment for women newly diagnosed with HIV/AIDS; and decrease the barriers for women to learn their HIV status and risk.

Ms. Nti has taken time off from her studies, but plans to go back to school so that she can work in a



Akua A. Nti said she was sexually assaulted and received treatment at AIDS Project Worcester; however, she tested negative for HIV after the assault. (T&G Staff/TOM RETTIG)

free clinic, similar to AIDS Project Worcester, in a Third World country. She said she has begun to heal because of the support she continues to receive at The Women's Initiative.

"I bumped into him about three months ago in the parking lot of a restaurant and he threatened me and said, 'If you don't be quiet, I'll come and beat you up,' " she said. The district attorney's office's investigation is ongoing, according to Ms. DiRoberto, but no charges have been brought. But one of the things that The Women's Initiative has taught Ms. Nti is the importance of talking about what happened, because things won't improve in silence.

"If any woman or girl has been sexually violated, don't keep it to yourself. Talk to somebody. That helped me a lot," she said.

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