

✓ C.F. AIDS RP 9/13/90 p. 1

Loss of AIDS programs decried in public schools

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One of the victims of budget cuts approved by Pajaro Valley school district officials last week was the AIDS Curriculum Program, which had its entire \$56,000 budget eliminated.

But the real victims are the students who are at an age that makes them the most vulnerable to contracting the deadly disease, Shirley Lopez, the director of the district's program, said.

Lopez, who helped design the program two years ago, said the

AIDS education program has been left to sink after being implemented just last year. The program is taught in fourth through 12th grades as part of a comprehensive sex education curriculum.

She said the AIDS program is desperately needed in schools, because teenagers are the largest sexually active population that has multiple partners. Although the public has received a considerable amount of information about AIDS in recent years, Lopez said the disease has been slipping in "popularity" and people think it is no longer a serious problem.

"AIDS is no longer fashionable," she said. "I think safe sex is a thing of the past."

According to a 1990 survey conducted in 99 California high schools by the federal Centers for Disease Control, 71.4 percent of 12th graders have had sexual intercourse; 44.4 percent of them have had multiple partners.

The survey, which included 8,000 students in grades nine through 12, said 64.6 percent of 11th-graders have had intercourse, and 36 percent of those reported having had multiple partners; 53

percent of 10th graders had had sex, with 38 percent reporting multiple partners; and 43.8 percent of ninth graders said they have had intercourse.

Having multiple sexual partners is one of the behaviors considered high-risk for contracting AIDS. Other high-risk behaviors include using intravenous drugs and sharing needles, and have sex without the protection of condoms.

Lopez said people see that most of the AIDS cases involve people in their 20s and 30s and think the problem is restricted to these age

groups. What people don't realize, she said, is that the AIDS virus can be dormant for 10 years before symptoms begin to show.

That means that most of the AIDS victims in their 20s and 30s probably contracted the disease when they were in their early to mid-teens, Lopez said, a time when this group has the highest rate of sexual activity.

In Santa Cruz County, there have been 108 AIDS cases reported between 1983 and March of this year, a report issued by the county's Health Services Agency

said earlier this year. One hundred of those cases were in the 20-to-49 age group, with the 30-to-39-year-olds making up 49 of those cases.

The report said 82 percent of those cases involved homosexual or bisexual men, and 4 percent were intravenous drug users. Only three women were reported having the disease; one was an intravenous drug user, one contracted the disease through a heterosexual encounter, and in the third

See AIDS page 9 ►

CF
AIDS

RP 9/13/90

► From Page 1

P. 9

case the cause was undetermined.

On the national level, federal General Accounting Office reports indicate that schools provide the least amount of AIDS education to 11th and 12th graders. The GAO report, which was issued this year, found several conditions in schools that it considered disturbing.

Among the GAO findings were the following:

- Only 5 percent of school districts require AIDS education at every grade level.

- Fifteen percent of school districts provide AIDS education in the 11th and 12th grades.

"This is troublesome because sexual activity is likely to increase at these grade levels," the report said.

Of the school districts not requiring AIDS education, most were small, enrolling fewer than 450 students.

- More than 80 percent of recipients of Centers for Disease Control funds did not collect data on students' AIDS knowledge, beliefs, sexual behavior and drug use.

- Training for some AIDS teachers was absent or often insufficient.

- Education for out-of-school youth — often the most vulnerable population — is limited.

Lopez, of the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, said she and her staff have "a few tricks up our sleeves" they hope will save the program. Although the budget cut eliminated her position, she hopes to continue to head the project under the district's mentor teacher program.

In the mentor teacher program, teachers take a year off from the classroom to work on whatever projects they choose. Some mentor teachers use the time to do research for new curricula, provide staff development and coordinate meetings between schools.

Lopez, who was a science and health teacher at E.A. Hall Middle School for seven years, is also looking into using part of the mentor teacher program budget to pay for training teachers. Once a year, teachers involved in AIDS education must attend a two-day training seminar, which Lopez helps coordinate.

There were 50 teachers involved in the program last year. This year, 43 elementary school teach-

ers have already expressed interest in attending the training that might take place next month if money is found to pay for substitute teachers that will take over classes while teachers attend the seminar.

The Centers for Disease Control reimbursed about \$3,700 that the AIDS program used to pay for substitute teachers. This year, that may not be possible because Lopez must first find the money, then submit the bill to CDC for reimbursement. She said training costs about \$75 per teacher.

Lopez said what students get is a frank discussion about AIDS and other sexually transferable diseases and various methods of protecting against pregnancy and the disease. But for some teachers, students and administrators, AIDS is still a very sensitive subject.

"Some teachers are still reticent to talk about it and some administrators were reluctant to have their teachers go for training," she said. "The kids were scared of AIDS, but they wanted to learn about it."

Lopez said she has attended several AIDS conferences in the state for school administrators and teachers, and the response she has gotten from them is overwhelming support and admiration for the district's program.

"They said to me, 'We can't believe what you are doing — we can't even say the P-word in class,'" she said.

Lopez said she has met a few parents that were afraid of their children learning about sex and AIDS.

"But after they learned about the program," Lopez said, "the difference is like night and day."

The state mandates that all materials used for sex education be made available to parents. It also allows parents to take children out of the classes if they want. Last year, about five parents pulled their children out of the AIDS classes in the Pajaro Valley district.

Lopez said she didn't think people will take AIDS seriously enough, and she predicts dark days ahead.

"AIDS has a big future," she said. "Humans have the short end of the stick."