

HIV tests a victim of the budget

By GREG BEEBE
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Sharp cuts in state funds for free HIV tests have area public and non-profit health agencies scrambling to find ways to continue aggressive efforts to stop the spread of the virus that causes AIDS.

The number of free HIV tests available to county residents was reduced by 25 percent this week because of state budget constraints. By lowering its reimbursement rate for free HIV tests performed at "alternative test sites," the state is reducing the number of tests available although the need has never been greater, say local health officials.

Local HIV experts also worry

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that the state Department of Health Services is flirting with a system that cuts support to communities with comparatively low

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Center combats AIDS on a shoestring budget

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SANTA CRUZ — Along the weed-infested levy of the San Lorenzo River, in a modest three-room building that once was a hamburger stand, workers and volunteers from the Santa Cruz AIDS Project's Drop-In Center wage a daily war against HIV infection.

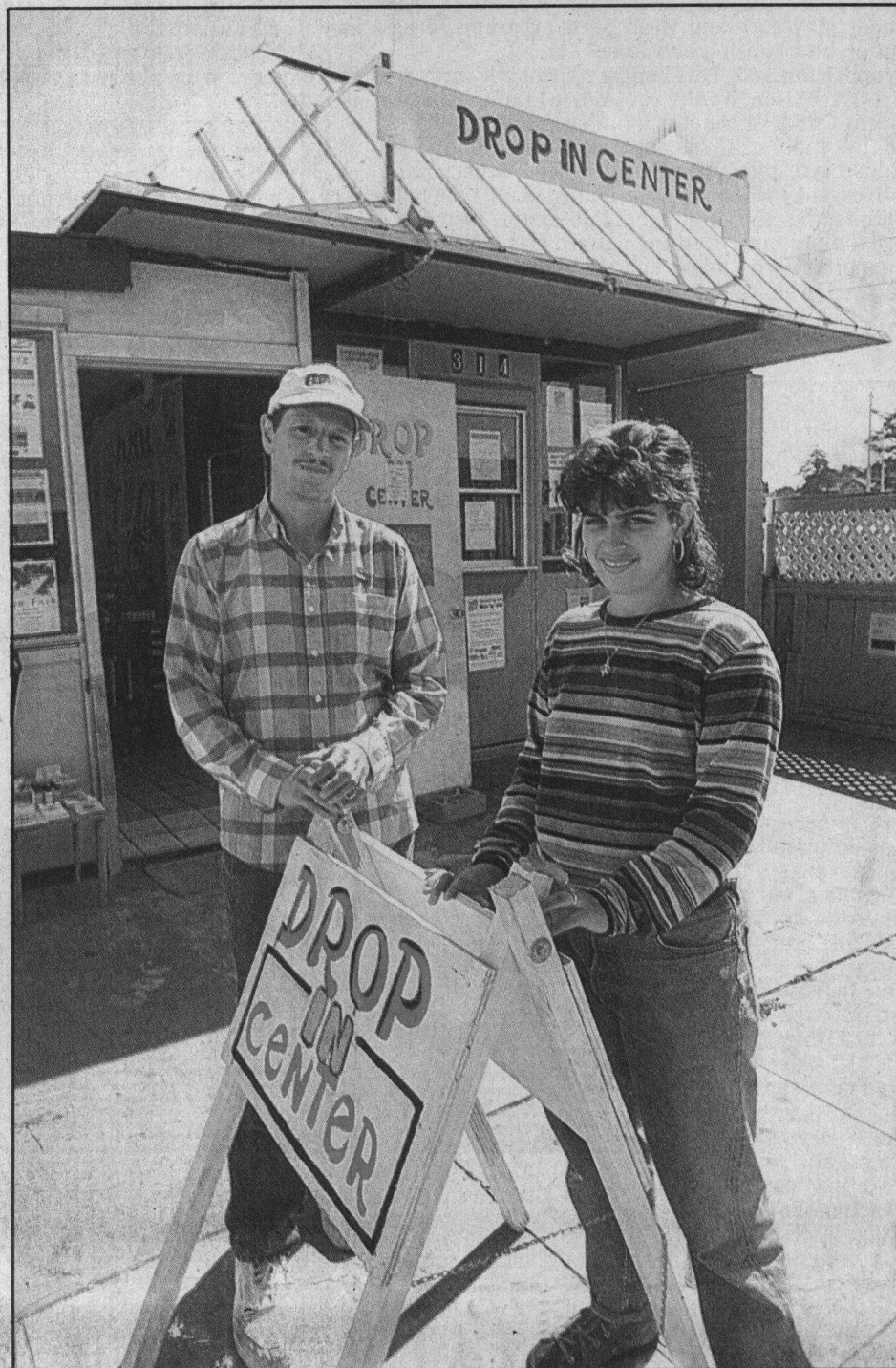
The weapons in this low-budget

skirmish are information, caring, creativity, counseling and a lot of synthetic rubber.

"Latex saves," said Diane Goodman, the center's director.

The Drop-In Center is furnished in junk-store chic; its curtains clash and the chairs don't match. Though scrubbed clean, the center is hardly institutional, as evi-

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Wayne and Diane Goodman at the SC AIDS Project Drop-In Center.

HIV tests in Santa Cruz

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rates of AIDS "morbidity."

The morbidity factor is particularly unfortunate, said Jeri Martinez, the director of the county's HIV Test Program, because it essentially penalizes communities that are making inroads in AIDS testing, prevention and education. The county's AIDS morbidity rate is about 2 percent.

"It doesn't reward our county and all our great health workers for the work in prevention that we're maintaining," said Martinez.

"We don't have the morbidity, so we don't get the funds."

The chief of HIV education and prevention services for the state Office of AIDS said the Department of Health Services has junked the morbidity rating idea, at least for the time being.

"We were looking at different formulas and that was something we looked at," said Anna Ramirez. "But we decided it was not an accurate look at what was going on in the counties."

Last year, counties received bonus shares from an emergency appropriation of \$4 million out of state's general fund to meet the incredible public demand for tests after basketball star Earvin "Magic" Johnson announced he had tested positive for HIV. Funding this year was trimmed back to the 1991 base level, about \$86,700, said Ramirez.

"We take the pot of available money and look at how much testing was done the previous year and allocate it proportionally," Ramirez said.

Diane Goodman, director of the Santa Cruz AIDS Project's downtown Drop-In Center on Front Street, said budget reductions for HIV testing send a "real mixed message" to the community. It probably won't be until more local people die of AIDS that the state will send more funds for testing to Santa Cruz County, she said.

In 1991, more than 3,800 people opted for the free, anonymous and confidential tests offered on a first-come, first-served basis by the county Health Services Agency at its health centers and through such non-profit agencies as the AIDS Project and Salud Para La Gente.

Hundreds more receive tests from private physicians and local private health clinics.

Anonymous tests do not require a name and use a only number to identify the taker; confidential tests list the patient's name and other identifying information, but are protected by medical-records disclosure laws.

Health officials say there are benefits and drawbacks to both forms of testing, and that the important thing is that people get tested.

Since 1983, 192 cases of AIDS have been reported in Santa Cruz

County. But public health officials estimate that as many as 3,000 people could be infected with HIV here and not yet show symptoms of AIDS, which attacks the body's immune system. Many others with AIDS have moved here in recent years after receiving their diagnosis in another community, stretching available resources, said Martinez.

Outreach and prevention efforts have made free HIV tests a "viable option for thousands of Santa Cruz County residents, and appropriately so, but just as the need is growing, the money for tests is being reduced," said John Laird, executive director of the Santa Cruz AIDS Project.

The tests are especially attractive to the poor and to people reluctant to be tested in traditional medical settings, he said.

"Some people can't afford to go anywhere else (for tests) but here," said Wayne Johnson, an HIV-positive, recovering drug addict who volunteers full-time at the Santa Cruz AIDS Project's successful Drop-In Center on Front Street, one of the county's four alternative test sites.

UC Santa Cruz, an alternative test site in the past, will have no free on-campus HIV tests this year as a result of the cuts, said George Wolfe, director of student health.

"It's very unfortunate, especially now, given the fact that early intervention (for people with HIV) is available," said Wolfe. "In terms of availing themselves of medical services, it's very important that people who are HIV-infected know so as early as possible."

Nearly 200 students have been tested at UCSC in the past two

school years, with several hundred turned away, said Wolfe.

The reduction in free tests "creates an additional disincentive" for people who are thinking about getting an HIV test, he said.

Area test-providers and health agency administrators met earlier this week to brainstorm ways to continue the local testing and prevention effort at the highest level; a revised schedule of test sites and hours took effect Friday.

Prescreening prospective clients according to risk is an unpleasant — and unlikely — alternative, said Martinez.

"We don't want to prescreen," she said. "We're trying to reach individuals who are fairly high-risk but we want to offer our services to the community."

Besides, said Laird, sorting test-takers according to risk is in itself

a risky proposition.

"Screening for risks doesn't work very well," said Laird. "There are incidents of people being turned away for testing as low-risk and becoming infected before they could be tested."

Among the alternatives discussed at the meeting were pooling laboratory work to get a better price; charging a modest fee for the tests; and asking clients to wait for six months after their possible exposure to HIV, since it sometimes takes that long for the virus to show up on tests.

Another alternative, said Laird, is to ask private health providers to more actively market their own abilities to provide HIV tests.

"It was a tough meeting," Laird said. "We had to figure out what to do when demand goes up and resources go down."

As many as 1,000 walkers are expected to make the scenic 10-kilometer (6.2-mile) trek this year, said project director Glen Schaller. The event starts at 9 a.m. Sunday at San Lorenzo Park and proceeds through downtown Santa Cruz; along West Cliff Drive; past the Main Beach and Boardwalk; and back to the park for music and food.

It is the largest single AIDS fund-raiser on the Central Coast, and a key source of revenue for agencies struggling to provide services in a recession and state budget crisis.

The agencies that will benefit from this year's walk are: Hospice Caring Project of Santa Cruz County; Monterey County AIDS Project; Salud Para La Gente Community Clinic in Watsonville; and the Santa Cruz AIDS Project.

Greg Beebe