

## Area HIV Stats Drop Thanks To Education

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Tuesday, November 9, 2004

Recently released state data show new HIV infections plunged 67 percent in Charlottesville from 2002 to 2003, compared with only a 20 percent drop statewide.

In Charlottesville there were 12 new HIV cases in 2001, nine in 2002 and three in 2003, according to the Virginia Department of Health.

Officials from the AIDS/HIV Services Group attribute the decline to their intensified education efforts made possible by a \$1 million federal grant received in October of 2002. The grant, which is being distributed over three years, allowed ASG to expand its staff from 1.2 full-time prevention educators to eight.

"We don't have data saying we are solely responsible but it's the greatest decrease we've ever had," said Bruce Taylor, ASG's program director for prevention education.

The grant is being used to educate high-risk groups, including blacks, Latinos, people under age 25, drug users and gay and bisexual men.

"All of those groups were being targeted before. It's just that now we have more people to reach them," said Kathy Baker, ASG's executive director.

ASG provided education and support services to 7,900 people in the 2003-2004 fiscal year. The group serves Charlottesville, Waynesboro, Staunton and the counties of Albemarle, Fluvanna, Nelson, Greene, Louisa and Buckingham.

"Our efforts comprise the vast majority of the efforts in the region for prevention," Baker said.

In addition to the emotional and physical devastation that comes with an HIV diagnosis, the financial costs are high. Per year, the average cost of treating a person with HIV is \$12,000 and for someone with AIDS it's \$34,000.

"When you look at the millions of dollars it would have taken for the federal government to treat these people, the savings are phenomenal," Baker said. "I think it's important to point out what the results of prevention are."

"This is far beyond what I had hoped for," she said. "I never expected to see results this quickly."

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