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By combining efforts, health advocates hope to strengthen the fight against HIV

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The AIDS Memorial Quilt, which was begun in 1987, is on display at the Rasdall Gallery at the UK Student Center. Above is a detail from one of its panels. Each section of the quilt has been sewn by family and friends of someone who has died of AIDS. DAVID PERRY | STAFF

It's World AIDS Day, and health advocates in Kentucky are banding together to get out a succinct message: Get tested and get treatment.

It's been 30 years since AIDS and HIV first widely appeared in the United States. Early treatment advances were slowed because of its erroneous label as "the gay cancer." That characterization slowly disappeared but a different kind of misinformation still complicates the fight against the disease.

Many people think they don't need to worry about getting HIV or AIDS anymore, said Annette Pryor, chairwoman of the newly formed Bluegrass HIV Coalition. "It's off their radar."

Shrinking health budgets were a contributing factor to forming the coalition earlier this year, she said. There was some duplicating of services that didn't make sense but more than that, advocates, activists and

educators hope their voices can be amplified by working together.

"It's up to us to be out there and in people's faces," Pryor said.

The coalition includes the Lexington-Fayette County Health Department; AIDS Volunteers, Inc.; Volunteers of America; the Cabinet for Health and Family Services; Hope Center; UK Bluegrass Care Clinic; and Gay and Lesbian Services Organization. And, Pryor said, the group is open to others getting involved.

Hundreds of Kentuckians are diagnosed with AIDS each year, according to statistics from the state Cabinet for Health and Family Services.

AIDS and HIV continue to hit minority populations especially hard. According to the federal Office of Minority Health, racial and ethnic minorities account for 71 percent of newly diagnosed cases. Black men are nearly 10 times more likely to die of AIDS than non-Hispanic white men. Black women are almost 23 times more likely to die from HIV/AIDS, as compared to non-Hispanic white women.

With people still dying, why is getting the truth out so difficult?

Because of its past link to homosexual activity, AIDS and HIV can be hard for people to talk about, said coalition member Mark Johnson, health equity team leader for the Lexington-Fayette County Health Department. This is especially true in some black communities where conservative churches play an important role.

Plus, he said, people see someone like basketball great Magic Johnson — still the public picture of good health some 20 years after an AIDS diagnosis — and think the disease is perhaps not so bad.

But what people don't see, said Pryor, is the often expensive regimen of drugs that is needed to keep the worst of the disease at bay, the side effects of those medicines or the ultimate end of what is still an incurable disease.

As the coalition gains members and strength, she said, it hopes to be able to reiterate the need for AIDS prevention and testing. World AIDS Day is a good time to remind people that free testing is available throughout the year at AIDS Volunteers Inc., said Angel Clark, director of the Center for HIV Prevention and Education. Public health departments also offer testing throughout the year.

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