

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WNCAP Launches “I Need You to Know” Campaign

Asheville, NC (June 2, 2009) – The Western North Carolina AIDS Project (WNCAP) is launching a bold media campaign to combat the problem of HIV/AIDS stigma in Western North Carolina. The campaign theme, “I Need You to Know” is an attempt to raise awareness about the problem and how it affects everyone in the community, not just people who are living with HIV and AIDS.

HIV/AIDS stigma acts as a barrier to prevention and is commonly cited by communicable disease experts as a reason why people fail to get tested. People don’t get tested, they explain, because they fear being treated badly or rejected by friends and family if they find out they are HIV-positive.

Testing is widely acknowledged as an important first step in HIV/AIDS prevention. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention estimates that one in five people currently living with HIV is not aware of their status.

In terms of health care, research confirms that earlier entry into care results in lower overall health care costs and better long-term prognoses for people living with HIV/AIDS.

HIV stigma affects all aspects of life for the 350 clients currently served by WNCAP in twelve western counties of the state. Some examples are extreme, as in the case of a former WNCAP client who was evicted from a homeless shelter in 2008 when his HIV status became known. More commonly, clients describe fears about friends, family and co-workers becoming aware of their HIV status because of concerns about the way they will be treated.

“It took a couple of months before I told my sisters,” says Shirley, a current WNCAP client who talks openly about her experience living with HIV/AIDS. “They didn’t want me around at all. My niece had just had my great-nephew. I didn’t get to see him until he was four years old.” The happy ending to that story is that while it took her family a while to get used to the idea, she does feel supported by them now.

Many other clients prefer to remain anonymous. The desire for clients to maintain a low profile when seeking services from WNCAP is strong, and helps explain why the agency has chosen not to post a large sign on the front of its offices in Asheville. “Protecting client confidentiality is a high priority,” said WNCAP Executive Director Ron Curran. “We encourage our clients to seek support from friends and family, but also understand their fears and concerns”

The problem of HIV/AIDS stigma tends to be worse in the South, particularly in rural communities like much of Western North Carolina.

The “I Need You to Know” campaign is an effort to raise awareness about the problem of HIV stigma and serve as a springboard for HIV/AIDS prevention efforts. It is also an attempt to show HIV-positive men, women and youth in the region how much support they do have from the community. A major goal of the campaign is to obtain 5,000 signatures from community members indicating agreement with a series of statements affirming the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS. The statements are:

- People living with HIV/AIDS deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.
- People living with HIV/AIDS deserve unconditional love from their families.
- People living with HIV/AIDS have a right to equal access under the law to safe and affordable housing, employment, healthcare and education.
- People living with HIV/AIDS should be seen as productive members of society.
- People living with HIV/AIDS have a right to LIVE, just like everyone else.

Residents may sign on electronically or download a printable version of the sign-on form from the WNCAP website at www.wncap.org/iknow.

A key element of the campaign is a set of commercials featuring men, women and youth living in Western North Carolina saying what they need others to know about people living with HIV and AIDS. The commercials were filmed locally at Bonesteel Films, with time and talent donated by the production company. The spots will air on Charter Cable channels during the months of May and June, another donated service that reflects Charter’s commitment to helping to end HIV/AIDS stigma in Western North Carolina. Posters, bumper stickers and other traditional forms of media are also being used in the campaign.

The “I Need You to Know” campaign was funded by the Cable Positive Foundation, a national organization that works to mobilize the talents, resources, access, and influence of the cable and telecommunications industry to raise HIV/AIDS awareness, to support HIV/AIDS education, prevention and care, and to end the stigma surrounding the disease. Since 1996, 300 local AIDS service organizations funded by the Cable Positive Foundation have formed partnerships with cable outlets around the country to produce locally focused HIV/AIDS related messages used to empower the communities they serve. This is the first such effort for WNCAP.

WNCAP is an AIDS service organization that provides HIV Case Management and other supportive services to individuals living with HIV/AIDS in twelve western counties of the state. WNCAP also manages a comprehensive HIV/AIDS prevention program for residents in seventeen western counties. Education staff reach an estimated 5,000 individuals each year in structured programs for high-risk men, women and youth. Thousands more are reached through general education and awareness activities such as an annual AIDS Walks and World AIDS Day commemoration.

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