

## *A Letter to the Community from AIDS Project Los Angeles*

There is growing concern about syphilis outbreaks among gay men in large urban areas, particularly in Los Angeles, as evidenced by the March 27, 2002 Los Angeles Times article "Gay Syphilis Surge Fans HIV Fears." There is good reason to worry about increases in new syphilis cases, especially because these cases reveal increases in unprotected sex between men, opening the window for new HIV infections. Although disturbing, these trends are not surprising to AIDS Project Los Angeles and to other veteran HIV activists who have long realized that prevention messages about condom use, while important, are not enough to prevent HIV transmission.

Poverty, racism, substance misuse and homophobia continue to compromise gay men's intentions to practice health-promoting behavior and are seldom addressed as the root causes of health problems, including persistently high STD rates in our communities. In a culture that trivializes gay male sexuality, disease prevention approaches are not likely to produce sustained changes in individual health behavior among men who have sex with men.

Disease prevention, as a public health approach, must be replaced with comprehensive sexual health promotion that addresses the prevention needs, overall wellness and behavioral health of gay men. Such sexual health promotion would stress the importance of proper condom use as one of many risk reduction strategies available while acknowledging other interrelated challenges in the lives of gay men. Friendship, dating, love, work, sex, finances, family, community, and acceptance all play a role. Blaming gay men for their "prevention fatigue" seems misguided, especially if we simply recycle the same old narrowly conceived condom use messages to curb the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis and HIV. We must adopt public health policy that supports sexual health promotion and that acknowledges the complexity and richness of gay men's lives.

Changes in public health policy will occur when gay men work together across race, ethnicity and class lines to hold each other responsible for the overall health and wellness of our communities. This means critical self-reflection and community involvement. Finally, as gay men we must be willing to speak honestly and unapologetically about our needs. We cannot allow syphilis, HIV, and antiquated public health policy to overtake our communities. Get involved. Help end the syphilis outbreaks. Let's prevent HIV transmission, together.



### ADMINISTRATION MAILING ADDRESS

3550 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 300  
Los Angeles, CA 90010  
213.201.1600

### APLA WEST

639 North Fairfax Ave.,  
Los Angeles, CA 90036

### THE DAVID GEFLEN CENTER

611 South Kingsley Dr.  
Los Angeles, CA 90005

### NECESSITIES OF LIFE PROGRAM SOUTH LOS ANGELES

1774 East 118th St., Building L.  
Los Angeles, CA 90059

### DENTAL CLINIC

1127 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 1504  
Los Angeles, CA 90017

### NECESSITIES OF LIFE PROGRAM VALLEY

6850 Vineland Ave., Unit A.  
North Hollywood, CA 91605