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The Center Long Beach gets grant for HIV testing

By Phillip Zonkel, Staff Writer

Posted: 02/19/2010 06:23:42 PM PST

LONG BEACH - The Center Long Beach has begun HIV testing for the first time since 2005, thanks to a grant from the Los Angeles County Health Department.

The \$393,000 grant, from the department's Office of AIDS Programs and Policy, funds the center's new rapid HIV testing program for two and half years.

The process takes 20 to 40 minutes, depending on individual counseling sessions and the number of clients testing.

Anonymous and confidential testing are available.

Prior to the health department grant, the center had not conducted HIV testing since 2005. However, HIV testing was conducted onsite through three mobile testing units from The Long Beach chapter of Bien Estar, a social services agency serving the Latino gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender

community; the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services and the Center for Behavioral Research and Services at Cal State Long Beach, said Ismael Morales, The Center's Community Health Coordinator.

The center returned to HIV testing after seeing startling data from the mobile units, Morales said.

Of 1,000 2008 HIV tests, 3.85 percent of the clients tested positive for HIV. The following year, 4.13 percent of clients tested positive, said Morales, an HIV counselor for four years at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center before working with the center.

During his tenure in Los Angeles, Morales said, the mobile HIV testing unit found 2 percent of their clients were testing positive.

In Long Beach, "The positive rate was too high," Morales said.

Since testing began Jan. 11, more than 100 tests have been conducted and two clients have tested positive, Morales said.

Anyone who tests positive is referred to the CARE program at St. Mary Medical Center for medical care, case management and mental health support, Morales says.

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CARE is the largest provider of HIV services in the area.

The center also will collaborate with CARE to provide extra staff and training to expand CARE's existing HIV testing program, says David Crain, CARE manager of client services.

Testing days and times have not been scheduled, he said.

The center serves the gay community and CARE works with families, people coming through the hospital and individuals who are not gay or people who do not identify as gay, Crain said.

"With both groups working together, it would be an umbrella to capture people who need testing," Crain said.

Testing at The Center is available by appointment only, 1 to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday, with walk-ins from 5 to 8:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday. For appointments at The Center, call 562-434-4455, ext. 238.

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