

# Commemorating National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day



## Message from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases on National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day

### Overcoming HIV/AIDS Among Black Americans

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has taken a greater toll on black Americans than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. It's estimated that more than 450,000 black Americans have been diagnosed with AIDS since the disease was first recognized, and more than 230,000 of them have died. Today, on the 11th annual National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, NIAID recognizes the terrible burden of HIV/AIDS on black Americans.

"The magnitude of this tragedy cannot be understated," said NIAID Director Anthony S. Fauci, M.D. "We in the health research community must do everything we can to understand and overcome the obstacles to HIV prevention and care in the black community."

To help fight HIV/AIDS among black Americans, NIAID is conducting two studies to learn how to improve the delivery of HIV prevention services to hard-to-reach U.S. communities at high risk for HIV infection. One of these studies focuses on black gay and bisexual men, and the other concentrates on inner-city women in impoverished, largely minority neighborhoods. In addition, NIAID and the D.C. Department of Health are leading the DC Partnership for AIDS Progress, which is taking multiple approaches to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic in our nation's capitol, a majority-black city.

[Learn more about NIAID's HIV/AIDS research.](#)

[See NIH-supported HIV/AIDS clinical trials currently recruiting volunteers.](#)

### Events

February 7, 2011  
National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day

March 10, 2011  
National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day

March 20, 2011  
National Native HIV/AIDS Awareness Day

March 24-26, 2011  
National Association of Black Journalists Conference on Health Disparities  
*Washington, DC*

May 18, 2011  
National HIV Vaccine Awareness Day

## **My Involvement with an HIV Vaccine Trial** *by Robert W. Williams, III*



It was 2004, when a few people from the San Francisco Health Department came to the Sexual Minority Alliance of Alameda County (SMAAC) Youth Center where I worked to do a presentation on an HIV vaccine trial they were conducting.

After listening to the presentation I thought to myself, “I am an out and proud black gay man who has had the great fortune not be infected with HIV after living my adult gay life for over 20 years. So why not use my body as a vessel to stop the spread of HIV, by getting involved in this trial?”

The next week, I made an appointment and went to a meeting where they gave me the consent form for the trial, a long, 50-page document. I read it and thought, “Wow, this is a lot.” I took it home and talked to family and friends about getting involved in the study. No one was encouraging me to do it, but I looked at it as an opportunity to give something back. They said things like, “Someone has to get infected in order to test the efficacy of the vaccine.” And to be honest I had not thought about this. But the counselors at the San Francisco Health Department made it clear that they didn’t want any volunteers to become infected and provided me with safe sex counseling as well as condoms.

I still wanted to be involved and did get injections. I thought to myself at the time that I did get vaccine and not a placebo. It just made me feel sluggish for a couple of days. After the study was unblinded a couple of years later, I found out that I had received the vaccine.

I must admit that going into the study; I did not know how it would affect me. But once I got in and started going to my appointments, the trial staff made me feel very good that I had done it. I received safer sex counseling that really made me think about the behavioral risks I had been taking. As a result, I also took a more proactive role in my health. I requested HIV testing every 3 months, even though the protocol only called for testing every 6 months. I also started having them test me for other STDs—not just HIV.

In 2009 the STEP Study came to an abrupt end because early results showed the vaccine tested did not prevent HIV infection. Needless to say, I was sad that the study I had been a part of did not find a vaccine to prevent HIV. But I learned from the trial folks that we had learned a lot from doing this study and that the results would affect the design of future studies. That is some small consolation.

Looking back now, I would do it all over again. It was a chance to somehow change the world, to leave it a little bit better than the way I found it.

*Robert W. Williams, III, works at the Center for AIDS Prevention Services at the University of California, San Francisco, where he assists with research on HIV Prevention Interventions that save the lives of young gay men every day.*