Memphis Youth to Get More Access to HIV, STI Testing and Services

New HIV cases among youth in Shelby County, Tennessee, are five times higher than in the rest of the nation—and rising.

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Spurred by an alarming jump in new HIV cases among teens in Memphis and the surrounding Shelby County, local health and school officials have agreed to expand young adults' access to HIV testing and related services.

Specifically, the Shelby County Health Department will provide HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STI) testing, counseling, treatment, education, clinical training and proactive programs and services to students and their families in Memphis–Shelby County Schools (MSCS), according to a press release from the health department.

These health services will be available to middle and high school students with parental consent. The aim is to lower the rates of HIV, syphilis and other STIs.

HIV diagnoses among youth ages 15 to 19 in the county increased by about 50% from 2022 to 2023, according to preliminary data from the Tennessee Health Department. What's more, new HIV cases among young people ages 15 to 24 are five times higher than among the same age group in the rest of the nation.

"The impact of HIV and STIs on Shelby County's young people is significant, and the burden of potential long-term health consequences is compounded by stigma and a lack of access to health care resources, specifically affordable and accessible sexual health services," said Michelle Taylor, MD, DrPH, the director of health services for the county, in the press release. "This valuable partnership with Memphis–Shelby County Schools will help us provide our young people with the information, screenings and preventive care they need to protect themselves. I am grateful to the Shelby County Board of Education and Memphis–Shelby County Schools leadership for putting the health of students and families first in making this beneficial collaboration possible."

The collaboration between the health department and education leaders come on the heels of an HIV summit held in the county in October, reports the Memphis Flyer. Conversations at the summit raised awareness of the issue.

“It was a renewed sense of urgency to say ‘Hey, why aren’t we in the schools?’” Taylor told the newspaper. “Or, if we’re in the schools, why is it limited?”

She added that the school system “services 106,000 students, and a lot of those students are adolescents—people we know we need to educate with comprehensive sex education and teaching them how to best protect their health in every way,” Taylor said. “We’re super excited.”

In a separate news release, the Shelby County Health Department announced it purchased a harm reduction vending machine “to dispense naloxone and fentanyl test strips to the public at no cost and with no questions asked.” Naloxone helps reverse opioid overdoses, and the test strips detect the presence of fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that’s extremely powerful and often causes overdoses.

The vending machine is part of a pilot program to increase access to harm reduction. A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held last week at the Hickory Hill Public Health Clinic in Memphis.

Sharing needles used to inject drugs is one transmission route for HIV and hepatitis C virus (which causes inflammation of the liver and can lead to cancer and the need for a liver transplant). For more, see the Basics of HIV/AIDS in POZ.com and “Hepatitis C Transmission and Risk” on HepMag.com, which, along with RealHealthMag.com, CancerHealth.com and TuSaludMag.com, are sister magazines of POZ.

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