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State Sen. Bill Perkins gathers community for HIV/AIDS awareness

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Special to the AmNews

Last week, New York State Sen. Bill Perkins recalled the alarming evolution of HIV/AIDS within the Black community. At a press conference held on Friday inaugurating a campaign to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS, Perkins said, "By the end of 2007, over 90,000 individuals in New York City were living with HIV...HIV disproportionately affects Black people, and we have to do something."

The State Department of Health also reports that while Black people represent 12 percent of the U.S. population, they account for almost 46 percent of people living with HIV and 45 percent of new infections each year. In New York City, the

Department of Health reported that the highest rates are found in Harlem, South Bronx, Central Brooklyn and Chelsea.

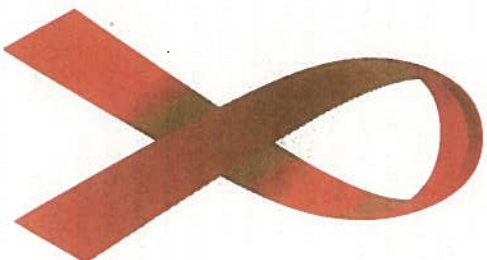
There is obviously no right moment to call for people's awareness toward this deadly pandemic, but as Perkins stated in a press release, "There must be a tireless vigilance 365 days of the year."

Such awareness events are more than relevant today, especially during Black History Month. Started on Feb. 3, Perkins' campaign of awareness is to rally communities as well as faith, political leaders and many other groups and associations around four key focuses: education, testing, involvement and treatment. "We all know that this pandemic is spreading within

our community, but it seems that the government is deaf about this, so we have to act and come together to find our own solutions because it has to stop killing our people," said the Rev. Dr. Calvin Butts, pastor of the Abyssinian Church in Harlem, in support of Perkins' initiative.

With the support of Harlem United Community AIDS Center, AIDS Council of Northeastern New York, Capital District African American Coalition on AIDS, Gay Men of Color Alliance and Iris House, Perkins will organize events to promote education on this disease. Testing will also be organized by those associations.

"As a community-based organization, it is our role to call for people's awareness concerning HIV/AIDS. We organize group discussions to



educate people and to fight against the misunderstanding of the disease. We all also organized a free STD testing on the February 7 and invited Miss Universe, Lela Lopes, to join us," said Jim Philippe, member of Iris House.

In an open letter sent to

President Barack Obama, Perkins called for the president's support to pass federal legislation that will provide funding to public health organizations and certify religious institutions to help treat HIV/AIDS in Black and African-American communities.

"We have to treat this like the crisis that it is," said Perkins in a press release about National HIV/AIDS Awareness Day.

The next event of the campaign is scheduled for Feb. 18, with an HIV workshop organized by the New York Association of Black and Puerto Rican legislators caucus. On March 4, a mobilization of Uniting Faith Communities will be held. March 8 will be dedicated to testing in the faith-based community.