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## **Solutions discussed to address spike in syphilis cases in Coachella Valley**

About 50 local residents, health care providers and community group members met Tuesday in Palm Springs to discuss a recent surge in syphilis cases in the Coachella Valley and seek solutions to the health issue.

The three-hour meeting of the Riverside County Syphilis Community Collaborative ended with participants agreeing to continue efforts to slow and eventually stop the spread of the infection. Lea Morgan, head of the HIV/STD branch for Riverside University Health System-Public Health, announced that the next meeting is June 26 in the Palm Springs area.

“We look forward to building on the success of this meeting,” Morgan said.

“There were great collaborative discussions about what can be done and how to move forward. It is important that we meet again right away to keep the momentum going.”

Morgan said the highlights included a “frank and open discussion” about the spread of syphilis and the importance of developing good communication between health officials and the target audiences.

The gathering is part of RUHS-Public Health’s “Spotlight on Syphilis” (S.O.S.) campaign to bring attention to the ongoing spike in cases.

The initial part of Tuesday’s meeting focused on data – both local and statewide – which showed there are increases in rates of syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases. Some of the reports indicate the stigma of testing can be a deterrent.

“It’s time to talk openly and honestly about viruses,” said Fourth District Supervisor V. Manuel Perez, who told the audience he was surprised when he learned about the data showing the spike in syphilis cases.

Perez said it was appropriate that the first meeting should take place in the Coachella Valley.

By sharing information and ideas, health officials hope they can come up with strategies and goals that are achievable, even as funding for public health and health care is shrinking.

“We’ve reached a critical point with the number of syphilis infections and the public health department can’t fix this by ourselves,” Dr. Cameron Kaiser, the county’s public health officer, told the gathering. “For all the programs we offer, more needs to be done and for that we need the community’s help.”

The spread of syphilis has been a growing concern nationally and throughout California for several years. In Riverside County, the rate is about 12 cases per 100,000 population, according to the latest figures. However, the rate for the Coachella Valley is 32 per 100,000, and in Palm Springs that figure is well over 100 cases per 100,000.

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