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From: Susan Unger [<mailto:susan@masterstrategy.com>]

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To: 'Susan Unger'

Subject: MEDIA ADVISORY: Syphilis Rate Rising Significantly in Coachella Valley as STDs Reach All-Time High in U.S.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact:

Bruce Weiss, Director of Community Health

Desert AIDS Project (D.A.P.)

Tel: 760-323-2118 x455

Email: bweiss@desertaidproject.org

Syphilis Rate Rising Significantly in Coachella Valley as STDs Reach All-Time High in U.S.

Desert AIDS Project urges all sexually-active individuals to protect themselves, test routinely, and seek needed treatment. Gay and bisexual men at especially high risk and should test every 3 months.

PALM SPRINGS, CA, (October 20, 2016) – Newly-released data from the Riverside University Health System (RUHS) shows that the rate of syphilis in the Coachella Valley is rising significantly. The troubling trend mirrors a just-released report from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) which shows the number of sexually transmitted disease (STD) cases has hit an all-time high nationally.

Desert AIDS Project and its sexual health clinic, The DOCK, are urging all sexually-active individuals to get tested regularly for STDs, get treatment if needed, and to use condoms to prevent the spread of infections such as syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia – particularly if having sex with multiple partners.

Syphilis rates in the Coachella Valley – as high as 192.3 per 100,000 in one zip code – are astronomically and alarmingly higher than the national rate just announced by the CDC as an unprecedented high in the United States: 7.5 per 100,000. The rise of the syphilis rate among local men is of particular local concern. According to the RUHS Public Health report *Syphilis Incidence in Coachella Valley, 2015*:

- Syphilis rates more than doubled from 2013 to 2015, from 14.7 to 30.9 per 100,000.
- Nearly 98% of all cases are among men.
- The most impacted age group is 40 to 64.
- In 2013 there were no cases in individuals 65+ old, however in 2015 there were 6 cases in this age group – potentially signaling a new trend.

- In 2015, Palm Springs and North Palm Springs continued to have the highest rates by a substantial margin. Per 100,000 individuals, zip code 92258 had 192.3 reported cases, followed by 92264 with 167.1 cases and 92262 with 165 cases. These three zip codes also saw large syphilis rate increases from 2013 to 2015.
- Many Coachella Valley cities saw significant syphilis rate increases between 2013 and 2015. Exceptions were a drop in cases and rates for Rancho Mirage, and almost all zip codes in Palm Desert, Thousand Palms, Indian Wells and La Quinta.
- The largest number of cases and increase in rate between 2013 and 2015 were seen among individuals who identified as white, followed by those identifying as Latino/Hispanic.

Based on these findings, gay and bisexual men between 40 to 64 years old who live in Palm Springs or North Palm Springs are at particularly high risk for syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections.

According Dr. David Morris, Chief Medical Officer for Desert AIDS Project, “The data and trends are troubling. Syphilis sores increase the risk of spreading HIV. We also know that HIV can speed the progression of syphilis – a disease which can cause permanent physical damage.”

Fortunately, individuals can take effective steps to protect themselves from STDs and their harmful effects. Stated Bruce Weiss, D.A.P.’s Director of Community Health: “The combination of condom use and STD testing is crucial to protecting yourself and to ending the spread of syphilis in our community.”

“Many people will have no symptoms and may not know they’re infected;” he continued. “Syphilis symptoms can often look like other illnesses. That’s why regular testing – every three months if you’re sexually active – is so important.”

For individuals taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) medication, “Remember that PrEP does not protect you from STDs, including syphilis. Routine use of condoms is effective,” Weiss added.

According to the annual *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance Report* just issued by the CDC on October 19, the reported number of STD cases has reached an unprecedented high in the United States. Chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis are the three most commonly reported conditions.

“We have reached a decisive moment for the nation,” said Dr. Jonathan Mermin, director of CDC’s National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention. “STD rates are rising, and many of the country’s systems for preventing STDs have eroded. We must mobilize, rebuild and expand services – or the human and economic burden will continue to grow.”

The CDC report stresses that an effective response to the STD epidemic requires engagement from many player. Specifically, they advise:

- **Providers:** make STD screening a standard part of medical care, especially in pregnant women. Integrate STD prevention and treatment into prenatal care and other routine visits.
- **Public:** talk openly about STDs, get tested regularly, and reduce risk by using condoms or practicing mutual monogamy if sexually active.
- **Parents and providers:** offer young people safe, effective ways to access needed information and services.
- **State and local health departments:** continue to direct resources to people hardest hit by the STD epidemic and work with community partners to maximize their impact.

For a link to the RUHS Public Health report Syphilis Incidence in Coachella Valley, 2015, visit The DOCK website www.thedockclinic.org

For more information from CDC's National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention, visit www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom.

About Desert AIDS Project

Desert AIDS Project (D.A.P.) is a Federally Qualified Health Center in Palm Springs, CA offering a combination of medical, dental, counseling, social services, support groups, alternative therapies, in-house pharmacy and lab, and other health and wellness services. D.A.P.'s Get Tested Coachella Valley campaign, the nation's first region-wide HIV testing and access to care initiative, was recognized by the White House for helping to bring about an AIDS-free future. D.A.P. is rated a "Top 20 HIV Charity" by About.com. Visit www.desertaidproject.org, www.thedockclinic.org, and www.gettestedcoachellavalley.org to learn more.

About The DOCK

The DOCK sexual health clinic at Desert AIDS Project provides comprehensive sexual health services, information and support. The clinic's quick, caring, and confidential services for individuals of all gender identities include: STD testing & treatment, Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) and Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP), and free HIV and HEP-C testing. For more information, please visit www.TheDOCKclinic.org.

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