



Everything Michigan

Regional program focuses on HIV prevention

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By **Bob Johnson** | The Saginaw News



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Delta student Zach Earegood watches and laughs as Delta student Jaymes Johnson receives a demonstration about proper condom use from HIV coordinators Jimmie Burkhead and Deidre Verdun at Delta College. Burkhead and Verdun set up a table at the pre-spring break student fair on campus. Verdun is an HIV prevention manager for Health Delivery in Saginaw.

SAGINAW — Deidre N. Verdun's mission is to raise awareness about HIV prevention.

Verdun, 30, a Grand Blanc resident, is HIV prevention manager for the Hearth Home, an HIV prevention site for Health Delivery Inc., 732 Hoyt.

A week before Delta College students went on spring break, Verdun visited the school to talk about proper condom use.

"They were having an event to show students how to be safe during spring break, so we were there talking about safe sex during spring break," she said.

HIV is the virus that becomes full-blown AIDS. As of January, known HIV/AIDS infection in Saginaw County totaled 198 people, up from 167 people in 2008. In Midland County, the figure is estimated at 30, with 26 confirmed. In Bay County, the January

HIV/AIDS estimate was 90 people, with 65 confirmed cases.

Last month, Verdun and members of the Black Nurses Association hosted "Real Talk" Prevention Exposed, at Covenant Healthcare, 700 Cooper in Saginaw. Through word of mouth, fliers and churches, the event brought in 90 teenagers.

"We wanted to engage youth in an activity that would help teach youth about HIV and STDs," Verdun said.

When a 45-minute orientation ended, the teens broke into three groups and shared conversations about issues young people face in modern times.

In a smaller room, Verdun and a her assigned group of teen girls were deep into a conversation about media influence and sexual risk-taking. They spoke about breast implants, liposuction and other surgical procedures while comparing 1990s hip-hop star Lil' Kim to popular star Nicki Minaj.

"How do you deal with the images of these stars with plastic surgery, knowing this is something everyone can't accomplish?"

"My goal was to show how images and the media influence sexual risk-taking behaviors," Verdun said.

After getting the girls comfortable discussing sex-related topics, some of them had questions of their own.

"How do you know if guys are being real and if they really care?" one girl asked.

Verdun became involved in the HIV prevention field while interning in 2003 at the HIV prevention agency Your Center in Flint. She has worked at the University of Michigan and in Kenya on an HIV research grant.

"If you want children to talk to their parents, they have to be in an environment that makes them feel safe to ask questions," she said.

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