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## African-American HIV/AIDS Resource Center



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## MOVERS AND SHAKERS

### "Down Low" Is Not Just a Black Issue, Palm Springs Mayor Says

Q+A with Ron Oden, Mayor of Palm Springs, Calif.

#### What do you focus on in your own AIDS advocacy work?

In my portion of the vineyard, I try to make sure that whatever I can do legislatively, I follow up. We have such a high concentration [of HIV/AIDS]. One-third of our community is gay. A lot of people move here from Los Angeles, San Francisco. They come here and retire because we have an outstanding HIV/AIDS clinic.

We've been able to secure annual block grants -- funds for the many people living with HIV/AIDS in our city. There are some monies, but certainly not enough, especially for education and prevention. And we're in the process of building a development for people living with AIDS, and that's a good thing. They've already broken ground. I'd like to see more -- really taking a stand legislatively -- to say, "Look, we need more."



#### What is the most critical AIDS issue facing the African-American community, and how should it best be addressed?

- What is the most critical HIV/AIDS issue facing the African-American community?
- What are the top myths that you encounter about HIV/AIDS in the African-American community?
- How have your relationships with family and friends changed since you were diagnosed?

## NEWSROOM

- Chicago Black Gay Men's Caucus Launches
- California: New Center Helps Blacks Access AIDS Services
- NPR's "All Things Considered" Examines HIV/AIDS Epidemic in Washington, D.C.
- Florida: HIV Testing for Blacks Is a Unifying Mission
- New Jersey: Blacks Still Bear the Brunt of AIDS
- **Full list of News Stories >>**

## what's YOUR OPINION?

African American and living with HIV? Do you feel you've received unequal care from your doctor or other health professional because of your race?

- Yes
- No

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Educate the broad-based community to the fact that the fastest-growing group being infected with HIV/AIDS is young African-American women. Our churches are so concerned about fighting same-sex marriage when in fact our people are *dying*. Whether two people who love each other marry or not should not be our primary concern -- it should be saving the lives of our women and children.

### Where is the most progress being made in combating the epidemic in the black community?

In a very general way, people are increasingly aware of AIDS itself. So I guess some progress has been made. But in terms of prevention on all levels, I think there's actually very little gain. We need new, focused, strategic education.

### What are the top myths about HIV you encounter in the African-American community, and how should they best be countered?

One is that everybody knows about it and everybody knows what to do. And that it's a gay disease. These myths are developed to insulate us from having to confront this elephant in the living room.

I think countering them is all about confrontation. As a people we have developed a kind of macro-comfort zone of our own society -- the myths of macho-ism and machismo -- [and] we do everything we can to protect them. But they need to be confronted.

### In what ways is the HIV epidemic different in the black community than in other communities?

I think even though we may or may not have more sex than other communities, we talk about it less. We talk about the mechanics less, we talk about birth control less, we talk about communicable diseases less. I think it's denial, period. It's insulation to protect us from having to confront realities.

### Do you think too much has been made of the "down low"?

Yes. I don't think the down low is a black thing -- it's a male thing. It happens with men of every ethnicity and race -- men who are bisexual. On that continuum between heterosexual or homosexual, depending on where they are in their lives, many men may fluctuate. A man who still feels very virile and his wife is going through menopause and he wants it quick, fast and anonymous, because he loves his wife and family, he will get into behavior that is risky. That has nothing to do with race.

However there is another part of the reality that we don't talk about, and that is the number of men that we have incarcerated. When these men are in jail, you can bet they're having sex, and the women don't question that on their return. Because that's the man they love and he's straight. And he is -- but while he was away, he wasn't.

### What can be done to help African Americans get tested earlier and therefore get better results from HIV treatment?

HIV testing needs to be promoted in schools, churches, big social clubs. Those in the entertainment industry, the sports industry, can be leaders. It needs to be a public call but a private experience so that they feel safe.

**About Ron Oden**

Ron Oden is an openly gay African American who last year was elected mayor of Palm Springs, which has one of the highest per capita rates of HIV/AIDS in the nation. A longtime city council member, Oden has consistently fought for increased funding for the Palm Springs' Desert AIDS Project, widely viewed as a model HIV service organization, as well as the rights of people with HIV.

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### **What are your hopes and fears for the next generation of African Americans as they face the risks of HIV?**

Well, young people do what young people do -- they have sex. And I am really concerned with more and more young people having sex without a full understanding that they are risking their lives. You know when I was a young man, if you had a bad experience, well, you got a shot of penicillin, it was all over. Not so today. It's a different world.

### **Can you recommend one action everyone can take to end the epidemic?**

Get tested.

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