22,000 estimated to have AIDS virus

By DOUG MYERS
Capitol news bureau

The incurable and deadly AIDS virus has invaded the bodies of an estimated 22,000 Louisiana citizens who are outwardly healthy, sexually active and generally unaware they have the disease, a legislative panel learned Wednesday.

"It's our best guess," said Ted Wisniewski, a medical doctor and director of the AIDS clinic at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. "... Most of these 22,000 do not know they have the virus."

Additionally, Wisniewski said, "80 percent of them who are healthy are sexually active" and the number of people identified as having the deadly virus is probably higher.

He said the estimate was based on studies indicating that one-tenth of all AIDS cases in Louisiana are reported. The nationwide average is about one-eighth, he said.

As of Nov. 1, more than 2,200 Louisiana residents have died as a result of the virus, which is mainly spread through sexual intercourse or shared hypodermic needles. AIDS diminishes the body's defenses against diseases.

Testing positive for the HIV virus means a person has been exposed to the virus but that the virus is not necessarily active. The HIV virus can remain dormant in a person's system for years.

Wisniewski, a member of an AIDS task force created by the Legislature, made the revelations while being questioned by the Joint Legislative Health and Welfare Committee on Wednesday at the State Capitol. The committee is studying AIDS programs in the state and where to beef them up.

Another fact unveiled is there is an increasing percentage of AIDS cases involving black people, and blacks also have a shorter survival time than whites — 9.9 months for blacks compared to 18 months for whites after testing positive.


Wisniewski said blacks have a shorter survival time apparently because they generally do not have the same access to health services as other races.

"This study seems to support this line of thinking," Wisniewski said.

Experts testifying before the joint committee said intervention programs — such as education and testing — are
the key to combating the disease, but that means more money. Wisniewski said that of the $14 million earmarked for AIDS programs in Louisiana, almost all is from the federal government.

The committee is considering AIDS funding to be requested during the 1991 legislative session.

"Despite our efforts we have a problem in school districts to talk frankly about the problem to young people," Wisniewski said.

However, state Rep. Alphonse Jackson, D-Shreveport, the chairman of the joint panel, reminded the panel that sex education in schools is prohibited.

State Rep. Mitch Landrieu, D-New Orleans and chairman of the Louisiana Legislative AIDS Task Force, said crunch time will come when the federal government requests that the states do their share.

Other AIDS statistics released Wednesday included:

- Louisiana is 13th among states and territories regarding total number of AIDS cases reports, 10th per capita.
- Trends show an increasing percentage of cases reported outside of metropolitan New Orleans — 29 percent of cases in 1986 compared to 44 percent in 1990.
- Forty-four percent of reported AIDS cases through November were people aged 30-39, 68 percent were white and 70 percent were homosexual or bisexual men.
- Survival time for those diagnosed as having AIDS is longer in some areas of the state than others. In Orleans Parish, survival time is 19.3 months compared to 16.2 months in Lafayette, 12.6 months in Baton Rouge, 11.9 months in Houma, 11.2 months in Shreveport, 11.0 months in Alexandria, 7.8 months in Monroe and 6.3 months in Lake Charles.
- The number of reported AIDS cases involving women has increased from five in 1985 to 38 in 1990.
- There is an 111/2 month waiting list to access to HIV ambulatory services at Charity Hospital in New Orleans and no funded services outside of New Orleans.
- Through an ongoing survey of childbearing women statewide, the number of HIV-infected people has risen from 1.2 per 1,000 to 1.6 per 1,000 over the last two years, which currently represents about 100 HIV-infected women per year who are giving birth.
- The highest infection rates have been recorded in the Monroe and Orleans areas, where it is between 5-7 per 1,000.

![AIDS in Louisiana](chart)

Source: La. HIV Services Plan, 1990

Advocate graphic by Greg Kiger