BR area leads state in HIV/AIDS

By The Associated Press

Intravenous drug use is the primary cause that the seven-parish Baton Rouge area now leads the state in the number of HIV infections and AIDS cases, state and local officials say.

According to the American Association for World Health, the human immunodeficiency virus is a virus that weakens the body's immune system until it can no longer fight off illnesses such as pneumonia, tuberculosis and cancerous tumors.

HIV infects and kills CD4 cells which direct the body's immune system to fight infection. A person is considered to have AIDS when their immune system is seriously damaged by HIV. If a person has HIV and their CD4 count is less than 200, a doctor will diagnose it as AIDS. A healthy person has a CD4 count of 1,150, according to the association.

There is no cure or vaccine.

Although the group with the highest number of AIDS cases is men sleeping with men, the group that is increasing the most in Baton Rouge are intravenous drug users and commercial sex workers, said Ric Smith, executive director of Friends For Life AIDS Resource Center in Baton Rouge.

However, Smith said, the disease isn't staying confined to drug users or prostitutes.

"They're taking it home to their families," Smith said. "It's absolutely going to blow neighborhoods away."

In a recent report to the Louisiana Commission on HIV/AIDS, statistics for 1999 show that 53 out of every 100,000 people in the capital city have HIV, while 49 out of 100,000 have the virus in the New Orleans area, said Beth Scalco, a member of the panel and administrative director of the HIV/AIDS unit in the state Office of Public Health.

Baton Rouge also has a higher rate of AIDS cases — 32.6 cases per 100,000 — than Atlanta, Dallas, Washington, Chicago, Houston and Los Angeles. Louisiana has twice as many people living with HIV or AIDS than Mississippi.

"Among large cities in the nation, the AIDS case rate for metro Baton Rouge ranks 12th highest; the metro New Orleans AIDS case rate is 14th," Scalco said. About 20,000 cases of HIV and more than 12,000 AIDS cases have been reported in the state, she said.

Smith estimates there are 3,300 HIV/AIDS cases in the seven-parish area served by Friends for Life, that translates into a possible 33,000 people who are HIV-positive but don't know their status, Smith said.

Reversing the trend will involve community outreach, education and a willingness to acknowledge and discuss the issue, he said. "It's going to take enormous volunteer effort and in-your-face this-can-kill-you messages," Smith said. "We have to talk about this."

The Baton Rouge area or Region II includes East and West Baton Rouge, East and West Feliciana, Iberville, Pointe Coupee and Ascension parishes.

African Americans are being hit hardest by the disease. Nine out of 10 women and four out of five men with reported infections are black. According to numbers from the state Department of Health and Hospitals:

- In Louisiana, African Americans account for 58 percent of living AIDS cases; and in Region II, they account for 76 percent of living AIDS cases.
- In Louisiana, African Americans account for 64 percent of living HIV cases; and in Region II, they account for 81 percent of living HIV cases.
- Non-Hispanic whites account for 38 percent of living AIDS cases in the state and 23 percent in Region II. Non-Hispanic whites account for 33 percent of living AIDS cases in Region II.
- Among living AIDS cases, Hispanics accounted for 3 percent of cases in the state and 18 percent in Region II.
- Among living AIDS cases, Hispanics accounted for 2 percent of cases in the state and 1 percent in Region II.

Meanwhile, Asian-Pacific Islanders and American Indian adults account for less than 2 percent of all cases in either category.

"It's not going to go away," said Dr. Newton Hyslop, chief of infectious diseases at the Tulane University Medical Center.

Rep. Jackie Clarkson, D-Algiers, and Harlee Kutzen of New Orleans said the time has come to start lobbying lawmakers to preserve state funds to HIV/AIDS education and treatment.

The state now allocates about $2 million a year in cash and uses another $5 million of in-kind services provided by state medical programs as a match for federal money. The $7 million leverages another $14 million for a $21 million total, Clarkson said.

Clarkson, Kutzen and state Sen. Paulette Irons, D-New Orleans, met with aides to Gov. Mike Foster recently to urge a $1 million increase in the cash allocation and to preserve the in-kind services in the budget.

That level of financing would mean a match of at least $16 million in federal funds at least $24 million for education, prevention and treatment programs.

"It will cost five times more (for hospitalization) if we don't do this," Clarkson said. "This is not a gay or a New Orleans problem. It is a problem for females and heterosexuals and rural areas of the state. This is a Louisiana problem."