NEW ORLEANS (AP) - Dr. William Atkinson and Susan Hassig don't give away any names in their search for information about the fatal disease known as AIDS.

"We're not fanatics about confidentiality," said Atkinson about his and Hassig's work for the state Department of Health and Human Resources. "All this stuff is locked in a file, including diskettes on the computer." He said they don't even report the names to the tabulation section on the fifth floor, and they don't go to the Centers for Disease Control.

"We go to extreme lengths to assure everyone we'll never give out a name," Atkinson said.

The reason is that if not just patients who sometimes are reluctant to give the state information police couldn't help discover trends in the spread of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

"Some physicians in small towns are worried about getting into phone calls if it's reported there's an AIDS patient in our town," said Louise McFarland, the state's chief epidemiologist.

"You see, in many of these towns, there's just one doctor, and they're afraid people would find out," McFarland said.

So far in Louisiana, 168 people reportedly have contracted the disease. Ninety-nine of them have died. AIDS is spread through sexual contact and contaminated blood products. Its principal victims are homosexual men, hemophiliacs and intravenous drug users.

Atkinson and Hassig also are epidemiologists - people trained to track diseases, to find out who is sick and learn as much as possible about each victim.

Their office is piled high with letters to doctors and hospitals around the state, urging them to report possible AIDS cases - which they are required to do - and assure them that everything will be confidential.

Atkinson began his AIDS work in 1983 as an employee of the Federal Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. After his contract expired in July, the state slipped in reporting AIDS totals. To catch up and streamline the reporting system, Hassig, who was working on a doctorate full-time this fall, was hired full-time this fall, and Atkinson was hired part-time.

Hassig telephones doctors and hospitals, and also travels around the state, talking with doctors and hospital workers and combing through records and files to find cases that might have escaped detection.

"Our work has been passive up to this point. We've been sitting and waiting for cases to come in, and you miss a lot of cases that way," Atkinson said.

In less than three months, Hassig's work has turned up unrelated cases, and their contacts around the state will probably turn up more, she and Atkinson say.

"You won't find all the cases, but if you can get good detectives, they will let us know what's going on," Hassig said.

In some cases, the population is not entirely given the correct information about AIDS. Although they say they would like to do detailed studies with patients and their families if they can work in the time.