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Oakland HIV/AIDS housing the focus of meeting

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Oakland Local May 14, 2013 - Written by CB Smith-Dahl

Just days before Affordable Housing Week, which runs through May 19, local activists, consumers and advocates came together in Oakland to discuss housing for persons living with HIV/AIDS.

The meeting was organized by Rosa Davis - the Medical/Lead Case Manager for Eat Oakland

Community Project - and Darice Bridges - the AIDS Housing Information and Referral Coordinator for Eden I&R, also known as Alameda County 211. Both women collaborated to form the East Bay AIDS Community Task Force.

At a similar meeting in San Francisco, Bridges and Davis realized there was a need to connect East Bay service providers and community members. Although the numbers of persons living with HIV/AIDS are lower in Oakland than in San Francisco, percentages/rates are similar and in some demographics, they are even higher.

The meeting began with a presentation by Bridges about the local resources available. She supplied a list of the Alameda County Developers/Projects with units set aside for persons with AIDS.

The 12 agencies and nonprofits range include Affordable Housing Associates, Allen Temple, the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation and Oakland Housing Authority. Between them, they provide more than 1,500 units, of which 192 are set aside for persons living with AIDS. The requirements for the units can be complex and the meeting was peppered with personal stories from consumers and providers about frustrations with the process.

Next came a powerpoint and discussion led by Nancy Bernstine and Christine Campbell from the National AIDS Housing Coalition. According to information collected from Federal officials in Washington, D.C., all Alameda County and Contra Costa HOPWA funds - Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS - are sent to the city of Oakland for distribution.

Alameda County Assistant Housing Director Michelle Starratt confirmed the procedure, but not the amounts cited by NAHC speakers. While federal officials said that millions of dollars remain in reserve, Starratt stated that all funds are currently assigned to projects. She also explained that money is divided on a 50/50 basis - half of funds go to consumer housing assistance and the other half are dedicated to building new housing units.

Many in the room commented on the fact that housing needs are shifting. The HOPWA program was put in place when an HIV diagnosis was considered a death sentence - not a chronic, manageable disease.

Local activist Lauren Jones said "Most of the funding is based on AIDS cases and most of us are of the goal that we're not going to get AIDS anymore. We're just going to be HIV positive. We have in our mind that AIDS housing is hospice housing. So what can we do to make the housing so we're supporting independence?"

Multiple statistics and research results were presented, showing that housing is an essential tool for ending the spread of HIV.

The last presenters at the meeting were a team of researchers led by Richard Speigman. They are conducting an Alameda County AIDS Housing needs assessment - the first such assessment in 16 years. Between now and November, they will be interviewing consumers at local clinics and conducting focus groups in English and Spanish.

All of those present agreed that advocacy is an essential part of the process. With the loss of more than \$59 million a year in re-development money and annually increasing cuts due to the sequester, new construction and current assistance will both be impacted.

Christine Campbell cautioned that Oakland's affordable housing helps prevent some of the

problems faced in other parts of the country - like the Southeast U.S. HIV/AIDS services are more readily available in Oakland than San Leandro or other outlying areas, she said.

"You don't want to create the kinds of problems where people are having to drive 90 miles to access services."

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