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Politics and Policy | Washington, D.C., Has Made Significant Gains in Fighting HIV/AIDS, Must Scale Up Awareness Efforts, Report Says [Sep 24, 2008]

Washington, D.C., has made significant gains in fighting HIV/AIDS, but in order to curb the spread of the disease in the city -- which has one of the highest infection rates in the country -- it must strengthen its public awareness campaign, according to a report released on Wednesday by the [DC Appleseed Center for Law and Justice](#), the [Washington Post](#) reports.


The report, the fourth since Appleseed began tracking the district's HIV/AIDS rate in 2005, cited progress in needle-exchange programs, expanded testing and education efforts in schools. In particular, congressional approval earlier this year to end a federal [ban](#) on using public money to fund needle-exchange programs helped to improve the district's response to HIV/AIDS, according to the *Post*. [PreventionWorks!](#) reported that it distributed almost 180,000 new needles and administered 97 HIV tests last year. In comparison to the last Appleseed [report](#), which was issued in December 2007, the district received several improved grades. Routine HIV testing went from a B-plus to an A-minus, as did needle-exchange services; substance use treatment went from C-plus to B; and HIV/AIDS education in public schools went from D to C.

Despite the improvements, however, the report said that the district "must take aggressive action to address the remaining obstacles to rolling back the epidemic." Although the report lauded Mayor Adrian Fenty's "call for HIV/AIDS to be his top health priority," it added that "highly visible government efforts to broadly raise awareness of the severity of the epidemic have been absent and reflect a lack of urgency." According to the report, the district in the past three years has created a "top-flight" leadership team at the city's [HIV/AIDS Administration](#) and has expanded testing programs in city prisons. However, the Appleseed Center urged Fenty to implement a broad public awareness campaign, particularly in churches, to reduce the stigma associated with the disease. Walter Smith, the Appleseed Center's executive director, said, "One of the things that I'd like to see is Fenty frankly speaking out more on this issue," adding, "A very active mayor could influence the faith-based community, the African-American communities, the Latino communities there. It's an issue that a lot [of] people, even now, are afraid to talk about."

The *Post* reports that there were 12,500 recorded HIV cases in 2006, the most recent year for which statistics are available. Thirty-seven percent of the cases were transmitted through heterosexual contact, compared with 25% that were attributed to men having sex with men. One in 50 district residents is thought to be HIV-positive, the *Post* reports. The Appleseed Center said it is waiting for new



statistics to determine if the city's efforts to fight the epidemic have had any impact (Dvorak, *Washington Post*, 9/24).

 The report is available [online](#).

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