

# Oasis Center marches to raise awareness of HIV on World AIDS Day

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MIDDLETOWN - Get tested. That was the message of AIDS treatment providers as well as those afflicted with the once-deadly disease at a rally and at the Riverview Plaza Thursday evening, on World AIDS Day.

About 40 staff members and victims of the disease from the Oasis Center, an AIDS treatment facility affiliated with the Community Health Center, held a brief ceremony where some members and patients delivered speeches before a march down Main Street to the South Green.

“Get tested,” said George, an individual afflicted with the disease in a short speech before the march. George receives treatment from the Oasis Center. “I’m not dying from the virus anymore, I’m living with the virus. It’s important to get the word out. I can’t stress that enough. I’m living proof.”

He was diagnosed in 1986.

“The virus doesn’t kill you - it’s the other things with the immune system that kills you...If you catch it in the early stages, you will have a lot of years ahead of you,” he said.

James said his infection was caught early, and his physical health was spared, but the psychological effects took a toll.

“For a lot of years, there was fear. [Learning of the diagnosis] kept me from doing a lot of things. There is a ‘leper stigma’ of those who have AIDS. People shy away from you because people don’t understand it. Friends went away. Depression set in and I didn’t want to do anything. It’s a different world. Your world gets really small,” he said.

After therapy sessions with councilors at the Oasis Center, they convinced James that if he did everything he was supposed to, like stay on his medications, that he could live a good life.

“I got out. I talk about it. Suddenly my world got very big. I have friend everywhere. Why take a chance and live a miserable life when you can get treatment? Get tested,” he said.

Tony, another patient at the Oasis center, said World AIDS Day has different meanings for different people.

“For me, it’s a time for reflection to remember those who didn’t survive. Life (with AIDS) now, compared with life then (when AIDS was first discovered), is you no longer look sick. You no longer are sick. Stay and fight until the disease is gone,” Tony said.

While the disease is still very much here, the medical profession has made significant strides in treating it, according to Dr. Marwan Haddad, director of HIV, hepatitis C and Buprenorphine services. Treatment with three medications from at least two of the six available classes of medications, he said, the virus can be suppressed to the point where the immune system can recover.

“[Advances in drug therapies]changed the face from a death sentence to a chronic condition,” he said. Other advances in medications can suppress the virus to such an extent that it can decrease the risk of transmission and there is no sign of the virus in the blood. He said, however, that the virus still does manage to “hide” in the body.

“We need to make sure people get tested and people engage in and are retained in care.”

Haddad said statistically about 20-percent of people have HIV and don’t know it, and about half of those 80% who are diagnosed are referred and retained in treatment and the other half do not engage in treatment. Seventy-seven-percent of those people retained in treatment are successfully treated.

He said the lapses are caused by a number of different factors, from social stigma, denial, mental health issues and economics. According to Kasey Harding-Wheeler, director of HIV services at Oasis, one in five people in Connecticut, or about 4,100, don’t know they are infected and are at risk of transmitting it.