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Health Quarters to split \$366G grant for more HIV testing

LYNN - A local taxpayer-funded reproductive health center will split a grant to test for and prevent immune deficiency syndrome with similar facilities in Lawrence and Lowell.

Health Quarters (HQ) has received a three-year, \$366,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to enhance HIV/AIDS testing and prevention services in their family planning clinics.

The grant provides money to pay for free or low-cost rapid HIV testing, counseling and education. It will also pay for assisted referral to care at Health Quarters' family planning service at Lynn Community Health Center.

Up to 3,000 patients could receive services at the three Health Quarters locations in the first year of funding.

According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 30 percent of people diagnosed with HIV infection between 2001 and 2003 either had AIDS when HIV infection was diagnosed, or tested positive for AIDS within two months of the HIV diagnosis.

Health Quarters is one of the few health organizations in Northeastern Massachusetts offering the rapid HIV test, which produces results within 10-15 minutes.

With this test, return visits for results are eliminated; post-test prevention counseling is available during the same visit; and persons testing positive can start medical care more quickly.

"For many low income residents of these cities, HQ family planning services are their only link to health care and a gateway to HIV testing," said Health Quarters Executive Director Lianne Cook.

She said the federal money will help Health Quarters reduce barriers to implementing The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) 2007 revised recommendations to make voluntary HIV screening a routine part of medical care for all patients ages 13-to-64.

"People want the peace of mind that comes with knowledge of their HIV status," Cook said, adding, "By integrating these services into routine family planning visits, we can reduce the stigma of testing and address barriers to diagnosis and treatment. Ultimately

we can better prevent HIV transmission and get early diagnoses and appropriate care to those who may be affected.”

Established in 1971, Health Quarters is a federal-and state-funded provider of gynecological exams; health education; and prevention services such as birth control and emergency contraception, cervical and breast cancer screening, STD testing and treatment, and rapid HIV and pregnancy testing and counseling.