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TAKE CHARGE STUDY COMPLETED!

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Affinity Community Services, in partnership with Dr. Alicia Matthews and the University of Chicago recently completed a survey of 230 African American lesbian and bisexual women living in Chicago and the surrounding metropolitan area.

This survey, funded by the Lesbian Health Fund, is one of the few attempts to describe the lives and experiences of African American lesbian and bisexual women in our community. We would like to thank all of the women who completed our survey. By participating in this survey, you added your voice to the growing numbers of lesbian and bisexual women who are insisting that our experiences and needs be known.

The information that you provided will be used to help shape the types of services provided by Affinity and will add to knowledge about Black women's health so that other ser-

vice providers and researchers can create initiatives specific to us.

In this newsletter, we summarize the information that you provided us on a wide variety of issues. We end by



highlighting some of the recommendations that were made about how to improve Affinity's ability to serve the community. For those

of us who may be in need of specifics services, we have tried to provide information about community resources throughout the newsletter.

If you find you need information about services that have not been included in this newsletter, please contact Affinity Community Services directly (773-324-0377) and we will try to assist you.

Again, we appreciate your participation in this groundbreaking project!!!!

The Face of Our Community

Because African American lesbian and bisexual women are less likely to participate in research studies, little is known about who we are as a community. Here is what you told us:



Q: How old are we?

A:

- **Less than 20 yrs. – 2%**
- **21-30 yrs. – 1%**
- **31-40 yrs. – 34%**
- **41-50 yrs. – 28%**
- **More than 50 yrs. – 15%**

Q: How do we describe our ethnicity?

A:

- **African American – 84%**
- **African American and have Hispanic background – 2%**
- **Afro-Caribbean – 2%**
- **Bi-racial/multiracial – 9%**
- **Other – 3%**

Q: How much education do we have?

A:

- **Less than high school – 1%**
- **High school/GED – 9%**
- **2- year degree – 36%**
- **College degree – 30%**
- **Graduate degree – 24%**

Q: How many of us are working?

A:

- **Working full time – 68%**
- **Working part time – 9%**
- **Unemployed - 12%**
- **Disabled – 4%**
- **Retired – 3%**
- **Homemaker – 4%**

Q: How much money do we make?

A:

- **Less than \$20,000 – 29%**
- **\$20,000 - \$29,999 – 24%**
- **\$30,000 - \$39,999 – 25%**
- **More than \$40,000 – 22%**

Q: What is our relationship status?

A:

- **In a committed relationship – 53%**
- **Single/Dating – 40%**
- **Separated – 7%**

Q: What are our living arrangements?

A:

- **Live alone – 58%**
- **Live with children in the home – 26%**
- **Live in a very safe neighborhood – 31%**

About 90% of folks who responded have had some college education....

What's in a name?

Sexual orientation is a complex topic. Many of us do not agree on one way to define sexual orientation; however, many believe that it consists of at least three aspects – self-identity, sexual behavior, and attraction. Here is what you told us about each of these three components of sexual orientation:

Q: How do we define our sexual identity?

A:

- **Lesbian or gay - 77%**
- **Bisexual - 15%**
- **Uncertain – 6%**
- **Other – 2%**

Q: What words best describe how we view ourselves?

A:

- **Prefer not to use labels - 31%**
- **Femme - 27%**
- **Androgynous -20%**
- **Butch - 13%**
- **Other - 9%**

Q: Who have we been most sexually active with since age 18?

A:

- **Only women – 19%**
- **Mostly women but some men – 43%**
- **Women and men equally – 9%**
- **Mostly men but some women – 22%**
- **Only men – 7%**

Q: Who have we been most sexually attracted to since age 18?

A:

- **Only women – 34%**
- **Mostly women but some men – 33%**
- **Women and men equally – 11%**
- **Mostly men but some women – 19%**
- **Only men – 3%**

To Be or Not to Be Out– That is the Question!

Although a very personal decision, studies suggest that being open about one's sexual orientation is associated with positive benefits including better mood, higher levels of social support, and engaging in fewer risky sexual and health behaviors. Here is what you told us about being out:

Q: Ever told anyone about our sexual orientation?-

A: **Yes - 99%**

Q: Who do we tell we are lesbian or bisexual?

A:

- **Immediate family members– 67%**
- **Extended family members – 30%**
- **Straight friends – 43%**
- **Coworkers/employers/classmates – 0%**
- **Doctors – 0%**

Q: If we were not out to our family and friends, would we prefer to be?

A: **Yes - 85%**

Q: Why aren't we out to our family and friends?

A:

- **We just don't talk about it – 60%**
- **Family and friends hold negative attitudes about gays and lesbians – 33%**
- **We view it as a private matter – 26%**
- **We fear being rejected by our family and friends – 22%**



What do I think?

Each of us holds very personal views about sexual orientation. These views extend to our comfort with our sexual orientation, how central our sexual orientation is in our lives, our concerns about sexual orientation, our beliefs about how others feels about our sexual orientation, and what children should be told about sexual orientation. Here are some of your attitudes about sexual orientation:

Q: Would we be heterosexual if possible?

A: **Yes- 18%**

Q: Do we want others to see us as lesbian or bisexual?

A: **Yes- 78%**

Q: Does being lesbian or bisexual say a lot about who we are as people?

A: **Yes- 59%**

Q: Does our race shape our experience more than our sexual orientation?

A: **Yes- 74%**

Q: Do we worry that we act too different from societal norms?

A: **Yes - 23%**

Q: Are we worried about people finding out we are lesbian or bisexual?

A: **Yes- 36%**

Q: Do we believe there is a lot of racism in the White gay community?

A: **Yes- 81%**

Q: Do we believe African Americans are accepting of lesbian and bisexual women?

A: **Yes - 31%**

Q: Do we believe that kids should be taught being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is normal?

A: **Yes - 87%**

At the time of the survey, 26% of us did not have a sexual partner...

To participate in discussions about topics related to sexual orientation, please contact Affinity Community Services (773-324-0377) to receive information about Lez Chat discussion groups and Social Justice Forums.

Sex in the City

Although establishing sexually intimate relationships is an important milestone for many healthy women, we know little about the sexual behaviors of African American lesbian and bisexual women. Here is what you told us about your sexuality:

Q: What was the average age when we had our first sexual feelings for another woman?

A: **16 yrs.**

Q: What was the average age when we first had sex with another woman?

A: **22 yrs.**

Q: If we are sexually active with women, what was the average number of female partners we had in the past year?

A: **2 female sexual partners**

Q: Did we use safer sex practices with our female partners?

A: **Yes - 9%**

Q: If we are sexually active with men, what was the average number of male partners we had in the past year?

A: **4 male sexual partners**

Q: Did we use safer sex practices with our male partners?

A: **Yes - 12%**

Q: Who are we currently sexually active with?

A:

- **Only women - 69%**
- **Both women and men - 3%**
- **Only men - 3%**
- **No current sexual partner - 26%**

To receive information about free or low cost HIV or STD testing or services, please contact one of the following local agencies: Chicago Department of Public Health STD Clinics (312-413-8000); CORE Center at Cook County Hospital (312-556-7667); Test Positive Aware Network (773-989-9400).

Sometimes wild women do get the blues...

Rates of depression and use of mental health services are consistently high in lesbian and bisexual women. Reported rates of suicide and suicide attempts, especially among youth, have also been found to be higher among gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals. A number of things are thought to increase our risk for depression including the stress related to coming out or hiding one's sexual orientation, discrimination due to our sexual orientation, and receipt of less social support from our families. What did you tell us about your experiences with mental health?

Q: How is our mental health?

A:

- **Excellent – 18%**
- **Very good – 30%**
- **Good – 32%**
- **Fair – 20%**

Q: Have we ever seen a mental health provider?

A: **Yes - 56%**

Q: Are we currently in therapy?

A: **Yes - 12%**

Q: Are we currently experiencing mild to moderate levels of depression?

A: **Yes - 45%**

Q: Have we had thoughts of suicide in the past six months?

A: **Yes - 15%**

Q: Have we ever attempted suicide?

A: **Yes - 23%**

To obtain information about where to get help for depression or feelings of suicide or to receive low-cost mental health services, please contact one of these local organizations: Community Counseling Centers of Chicago (773-765-0822); Howard Brown Health Center (773-388-1600); Center on Halsted (773-871-2273); Illinois Suicide and Crisis Hotlines (800-784-2433).



Lean on me when you're not strong...

Many of us experience stress in our daily lives. Use of positive coping strategies can help reduce the harmful consequences of stress. However, far too often, we fall back on negative or potentially harmful methods for coping with stress. Here is what you told us about the stress in your lives:

Q: How stressed out are we?

A: **Average stress level is 5.8 (a 10 is the highest level of stress)**

Q: What is causing us the most stress?

A:

- **Work/career – 33%**
- **Financial concerns – 27%**
- **Relationship problems – 11%**
- **Health issues – 6%**

Q: What type of things do we do to cope?

A:

- **Spiritual beliefs – 81%**
- **Eating – 52%**
- **Talking with friends – 74%**
- **Drinking alcohol: 25%**

- **Exercise – 68%**
- **Smoking cigarettes: 25%**
- **Talking with a partner – 59%**
- **Using drugs: 17%**

To obtain information about where to attend support groups or receive low-cost mental health services, please contact one of these local organizations: Community Counseling Centers of Chicago (773-765-0822); Howard Brown Health Center (773-388-1600); Center on Halsted (773-871-2273); YMCA Women's Services (312-372-6600).

What ever happened to house calls?

Studies consistently show that African Americans have lower access to health care due to poverty, lack of insurance coverage, and a limited number of health care facilities in minority communities. Even more troubling is the fact that African Americans receive lower quality health care compared to Caucasians even if we have the same level of income and type of insurance. What did you tell us about your health care experiences?

Q: Do we have insurance coverage?
A: Yes - 81%

Q: Do we have a regular doctor that we see?
A: Yes - 86%

Q: Where do we receive the majority of our health care services?
A: Private practice - 48%

Q: Have we seen a doctor in past 6 months?
A: Yes - 75%

Q: Are we satisfied with the quality of our health care services?
A: Average rating = 7.3 (a 10 is most satisfied)

Q: Are we satisfied with our relationship with our doctor?
A: Average rating = 7.2 (a 10 is the most satisfied)

Q: Are we satisfied with our overall medical care?
A: Average rating = 7.0 (a 10 is the most satisfied)

Q: Did we report having a negative experience in a health care setting?
A: Yes - 35%

Q: What did we do after having a negative experience in a health care setting?
A:

- **We did not follow our doctor's advice: 30%**
- **We did not return for our next medical appointment: 37%**
- **We changed doctors: 40%**
- **We stayed with that doctor but trusted him/her less: 19%**
- **We stopped going to the doctor as often as we needed to: 30%**
- **We stopped going for treatment entirely: 18%**
- **We didn't go to the doctor the next time we were sick: 25%**

Sick and tired of being sick and tired...

Getting regular health screenings is one of the most important ways to maintain good health. Receiving regular screening tests helps to identify health problems early so that they can be effectively treated. Studies show that African American women are less likely than Caucasian women to receive regular screening tests for diseases such as cancer. As a result, we are more likely to be diagnosed with a disease that is very far advanced. Here is what you told us about your receipt of health screening tests:

Q: Do we conduct monthly breast self-examinations?
A: Yes- 27%

Q: Have we had a mammogram?
A: Yes- 64%

Q: Have we had a pap test?
A: Yes- 96%

Q: Have we had a colon test?
A: Yes- 29%

Q: Have we had a blood pressure test?
A: Yes- 86%

Q: Have we had a cholesterol level test?
A: Yes- 81%

Q: Have we had a diabetes test?
A: Yes- 69%

To obtain information about where to receiving free or low-cost health screening tests, contact one of these local organizations: Chicago Department of Public Health (773-772-6270); Chicago Women's Health Center (773-935-6126); Howard Brown Health Center (773-388-1600).

To obtain information about where to receive sensitive health care services, contact one of these local organizations: Chicago Women's Health Center (773-935-6126); Howard Brown Health Center (773-388-1600); Lesbian Community Cancer Project (773-561-4662).

We Shall Overcome One Day!!

Discrimination due to sexual orientation can be a common part of our daily lives. However, African American lesbian and bisexual women may also experience discrimination due to racism. Both types of discrimination are thought to cause significant stress and to place some of us at risk for physical and mental health problems. Here is what you have told us about your experiences with both homophobia and racism:

Type of Discrimination	Total %	Due to Sexual Orientation	Due to Race
Offensive remarks	60%	77%	47%
Others avoided you	22%	65%	28%
Made to feel didn't fit in	37%	65%	49%
Unfair treatment at work	25%	46%	52%
Unfair treatment by service people	35%	42%	75%
Threatened or harmed	16%	40%	25%
Worry about violence	—	60%	69%

To receive information about assistance for victims of violence or hate crimes, please contact the following local community agency: Center on Halsted Anti-Violence Project (773-871-2273)



An Apple a Day...

A recent report by the federal government has confirmed what we already know; African Americans have poorer health, are more likely to have a chronic illness and are more likely to be very sick because of their illness. Many health problems can be linked to lifestyle factors and health behaviors. Here is what you told us about your health and health behaviors.

Q: How would we rate our health?

A:

- **Excellent – 17%**
- **Very Good - 43%**
- **Good – 30%**
- **Fair – 10%**

Q: What are our health habits?

A:

- **Current smoker – 32%**
- **Current drinker – 75%**
- **Reported any drinking related problem – 43%**
- **Received any treatment for drinking in past year – 2%**
- **Current marijuana user – 24%**
- **Exercise 3-4 times weekly – 23%**
- **Eat 5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily – 7%**
- **Eat red meat more than twice a week – 26%**

Q: What is our body size?

Body mass index (BMI) is measure of body fat based on height and weight.

A:

- **< 18.5 = Underweight — 1%**
- **18.5-24.9 = Normal — 14%**
- **25-29.9 = Overweight — 26%**
- **30+ = Obese — 59%**

To receive information about drug or alcohol treatment services, please contact one of the following local community agencies: Alcohol Hotline (800-253-6465); Chicago Department of Public Health (773-772-6270); Chicago Department of Public Health Smoking Cessation Program (877-897-2777). To receive information about exercise options, contact Affinity Community Services for information about our walking program (773-324-0377).

There is never an excuse for violence!

Unfortunately, violence against women is far too common. Being the victim of physical or sexual violence can cause many types of problems including anxiety, depression and relationship problems. Far too often these events go unreported. Here is what you told us about your experiences with acts of violence.

Type of Violence	Experienced it?	Of those who experienced it, how many reported it?
Forced sex stranger	25%	48%
Forced sex known person	36%	1%
Forced sex with partner	20%	1%
Physically attacked	26%	35%
Physically attacked with weapon	19%	41%
Physically attacked by a partner	36%	25%

To receive information about rape counseling, domestic violence, and services for victims of assault, contact one of the following local organizations: Chicago Abused Women’s Coalition (773-278-4566); Center on Halsted Community Services (773-871-2273); Lesbian and Gay Police Association (312-409-4881); Rape Victim Advocates (312-663-6303); Evanston Shelter for Battered Women and Their Children (847-864-8780); YMCA Women’s Services (312-372-660).



Evaluation of Affinity Community Services



Receiving feedback from women who participate in programming at Affinity is extremely valuable to our ability to improve services and meet the needs of the community. Here is what you've told us about Affinity.

Q: Ever volunteered for Affinity?

A:

- No – 73%
- Yes, in the past – 16%
- Yes, currently – 11%

Q: Top new programming interests?

A:

- Weight loss – 43%
- Stress reduction – 41%
- Nutrition/exercise – 40%
- Alternative medicine – 35%
- Depression – 34%
- Self-defense – 33%

Q: What events do you attend?

A:

- Special events – 45%
- Forty-plus – 26%
- Lez Chat – 20%
- Healthy Woman – 12%
- Social Justice – 8%
- XPU – Youth Programming – 6%

Q: What do you think about the programming?

A:

- Excellent – 26%
- Very Good – 47%
- Good – 21%

Summary

After finishing this survey, we have learned some new things about our community and also confirmed some things that many of us probably already guessed! Finally having this documented will not only help us inform future researchers and service providers that want to work with us, but most importantly, this gives us the power of knowledge about ourselves!! Using this data, we can think more critically about who we are and who we want to be as a community . We look forward to many more conversations about your reactions to this survey and the information garnered from it.

Thank you so much!!! Your participation and support is forever appreciated!

With Love,
Affinity

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We're on the web!

www.affinity95.org

Affinity's mission is to provide comprehensive services and a safe space on the South Side of Chicago for Lesbians and Lesbian youth of African descent.

The scope of our efforts will also include providing a supportive environment for bisexual women, transgendered persons, lesbians of color, our families, friends, and other supporters. We ask that all constituents respect that some of our activities and events will include forums that are open to all, and some that are only open to those of African descent. We will provide and promote services to meet existing and emerging needs related to health, advocacy, education, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Our fundamental commitment is to facilitate wellness within and among these groups and to contribute to the national knowledge base regarding African American Lesbians.



Special Thanks: Dr. Alicia Matthews for your commitment and hard work. Also, we greatly appreciate the support of the Lesbian Health Fund for making this study possible!