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## In Washington, free HIV-AIDS testing while you wait

**F**aced with the highest HIV-AIDS rates in the United States, community health activists in the nation's capital have come up with a novel way for people to save their own lives while killing time. The Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) office in Anacostia, southeast Washington, is the first in the country to offer HIV tests to drivers who are waiting their turn for a new licence or vehicle tag. The voluntary tests take place in a small, poster-lined office just off the DMV waiting room. They are also free – with a \$15 discount on DMV services thrown in as an incentive. “It’s safer to know than to not know,” said construction labourer Luis Angel Hough, 23, running a swab around the inside of his lips that revealed his negative HIV status in a matter of minutes. Exploring ways to ramp up voluntary HIV testing globally is among topics to be considered at the six-day International AIDS Conference that ends today in Washington.

Offering tests in public places where people find themselves waiting – such as the Anacostia DMV office, five miles (eight kilometres) along Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House – is one innovation. With its low-income neighbourhoods, Anacostia is the centre of the HIV-AIDS epidemic in Washington, whose city-wide prevalence rate of 2.7 per cent (nearly 15,000 people) exceeds that of many developing countries. Family Medical and Counselling Service, a community health centre in Anacostia, started the service in October 2010 with funding in part from Gilead Sciences, a maker of antiretroviral drugs. Since then it has tested about 9,000 people, more than through any of its other testing initiatives. It has also set up a similar facility in a food stamp office, testing 3,500 people since November last year. “It’s important to be here because it gives us an opportunity to touch a wide range of people on a daily basis,” its chief operations officer Angela Fulwood Wood told AFP at the bustling DMV office.

It also “gives us an opportunity to reduce the stigma that is associated with HIV testing and with HIV in the community,” she said. Every few minutes, a member of Family and Medical Counselling Service makes a short speech in the DMV waiting room, inviting people to volunteer for a simple swab test that takes about 20 minutes to complete. Those with negative results get a certificate saying as much. Those who are positive can get a ride immediately to another nearby office for a confirmatory blood test and medical counselling. “This issue of people not knowing their HIV status is still substantial,” said Wood, a native Washingtonian who has lost two family members to AIDS. “We know about HIV, we know it exists, but there are still too many residents that do not know their HIV status.”

In its annual HIV-AIDS report, Washington’s health department said: “Men having sex with men and heterosexual contact are the two leading transmission modes of new HIV cases.” Wood confirmed that “we’re seeing more heterosexual contact” resulting in HIV infection, alongside “a large number of (drug) injectors and women who have been affected through behaviour related to their drug use.” Julie Bell, 39, emerged from her test very relieved, if a bit annoyed that her occasional male partner expected her to undergo the test to save him the trouble of getting tested himself. “People live very loose lifestyles now. They change lovers like the seasons,” she lamented. “You know, it (HIV) needs to be taken a little more seriously. I’ve been considering going celibate myself.”

• **HIV EDUCATION:** HIV Counsellor Stephanie Washington (L) hands out pamphlets to customers as they arrive at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) in Washington, telling them about free HIV testing done on site. – Relaxnews 