

Russian group, Danbury kids have lesson in HIV/AIDS
By Heather Barr THE NEWS-TIMES
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The News-Times / Carol Kalif: Daria Khrustaleva, left, an HIV/AIDS worker from Russia, and Alar Gontijo with Interfaith AIDS Ministry of Greater Danbury,

talk to Danbury High School students Wednesday about HIV and AIDS. DANBURY Daria Khrustaleva, 23, stood in front of some 35 students at Danbury High School Wednesday, explaining the difference between AIDS and HIV. Many students did not know.

AIDS is a disease, she said. HIV is a virus. When a person gets infected with the HIV virus and his white blood cell count decreases, he usually has AIDS.

Khrustaleva and others drew diagrams of cells on the chalkboard to help students visually understand. Many students did not realize viruses never leave the body. Rather, the symptoms are lessened with antibiotics and medications.

Wednesday was World AIDS Awareness Day, when people all over the world provide information about HIV/AIDS and how to prevent it.

Interfaith AIDS Ministry of Greater Danbury officials came to talk to several classes at Danbury High School.

IAM is a nonprofit organization that educates people about prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS, as well as provides food and other home supplies, programs and emotional support to some 65 families in the Danbury area.

Khrustaleva and Konstantin Diakonov, both 23, are HIV/AIDS workers in Russia who try to spread awareness and prevention. They came to Danbury Nov. 12 and joined IAM officials at the high school.

Russia has an estimated 300,000 people infected with HIV/AIDS. Many are in Moscow and a large percentage are drug users.

Some cities near China also have a big population of people infected, as a lot of drugs are brought in from China.

But there are also those in the countryside villages who are infected, many of whom have no education about HIV/AIDS.

Khrustaleva and Diakonov, along with some 19 other Russians stationed across the country, are learning about U.S. approaches to HIV/AIDS.

The Russians came to the U.S. through the International Research & Exchange Board, an international non-profit organization. About 25 Americans from HIV/AIDS organizations went to cities in Russia.

The volunteers said in Russia, there is not a lot of tolerance for HIV/AIDS patients or for gays or lesbians. There is no special medical care and many HIV/AIDS patients are afraid to get help for fear of discrimination.

Diakonov is excited to learn how organizations in the U.S. educate the public about HIV/AIDS so he can incorporate some programs back in Russia.

Most HIV/AIDS education goes on only in the large cities in Russia, the volunteers said. "There is a lack of money and lack of governmental support," Khrustaleva said.

With so many in the small villages making only \$20 to \$100 a month, many do not have money to get help and most don't have cars. In addition, villagers do not think they will ever become infected.

Another obstacle is Russian schools do not teach health or sexuality classes, so students don't learn about HIV/AIDS.

Sometimes when HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention program officials talk to school officials about doing a program, they're told there is no reason to have it because students don't do drugs, drink alcohol or have sex.

But Khrustaleva said there are many schools that are open to presentations. As part of the presentation, they teach how to properly use a condom.

Khrustaleva has learned about some programs in the U.S. that she would like to start in Russia. One is a food pantry that would give out supplies to families of those infected, like IAM does. But she knows that it would take a lot of money and donations.

The Russian volunteers and IAM officials will speak to a microbiology class at Western Connecticut State University on Monday.

Health education teacher Doreen Robbins assisted in a class where the Russian volunteers and IAM officials spoke Wednesday.

Quinones said if she ever has sex, she will make sure her partner has been tested for HIV/AIDS.

"It went really well," she said.

She liked how the volunteers were able to help students learn more about HIV/AIDS.

She is very grateful for IAM officials who come to the school to do presentations.

"She makes it so real," Robbins said of Mio Galarza, IAM's director of AIDS education. "She is not uncomfortable to talk about it."

Galarza said seeing the Russians and their work, she feels good that more young people are becoming advocates to educate people.

Danbury High School has a place where students can anonymously get tested for HIV/AIDS. Robbins knows there are students who do have the virus or disease, showing how real it is that high school kids are very at risk.

IAM representatives talked to students about frequently asked questions about HIV/AIDS and what symptoms people would have if they were infected.

Students were asked if someone could get HIV/AIDS from kissing. Most students said no. Brooke Mauricio, 14, a freshman, said she wasn't sure.

HIV/AIDS is transmitted through the blood, semen, breast milk and bodily fluids like saliva, but rarely do people get infected from kissing unless they have huge open sores in their mouths that are bleeding.

Brennen Zaborowski, 15, a freshman, said he was shocked young teens are infected.

He was also surprised people can rarely get HIV/AIDS from kissing, and he learned two guys or two women having sex can also get HIV/AIDS.

Zaborowski believes everyone should be educated because those who are not have no idea how to protect themselves. He talks with friends about how they should protect themselves during sex because they could contract a disease.

Mitchell Carvalho, 14, a freshman, said he learned people infected can now live longer and how exactly a person can and cannot become infected.

Freshman Laurel Quinones, 14, said anyone could be infected, even her best friend.

"I am surprised at how many people become infected," she said. "People should be careful."

Freshman Mitosia Partcelli, 13, agreed. "People don't think it can happen to them," Partcelli said. "In reality it can happen to anybody."