

Actress takes AIDS fight to Washington

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Sheryl Lee Ralph is gearing up for a sit-in. Fed up with the impact of the AIDS epidemic on Black America, the actress and activist is leading a demonstration on Sept. 27 at 10 a.m. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Ralph, who was propelled into AIDS activism after seeing cast members in the original Broadway company of DreamGirls die from the disease, wants to call attention to the disparity between what the federal government does for people living with AIDS overseas and what it does at home, despite the disturbing toll that disease is taking in America.

Her latest move comes in response to new U.S. Centers for Disease Control statistics indicating that the nation's AIDS epidemic is larger than was previously stated.

According to the CDC's new estimates, communities of color account for a combined total of 65 percent of the approximately 36,300 new HIV infections occurring in the U.S.

"We can not remain silent on this issue," Ralph said. "We should be outraged that people are really becoming infected in America in record numbers."

She hopes to be joined in D.C. by those who are willing to take a stand and demand change when it comes to the health of all Americans.

"The time is now," Ralph said. "If we don't stand up for ourselves, who will? AIDS affects us all."

According to a report by the Black AIDS Institute titled "Let Richard Black America: A Neglected Priority in the Global AIDS Epidemic," if Black America sits its own country, it would constitute the world's 33th most populous nation, but would rank 160th



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in the world in the number of people living with HIV.

The Black AIDS Institute noted that in areas such as Detroit, Newark, N.J., New York, Washington, D.C. and areas in the South, HIV infection rates among Blacks are approaching those of sub-Saharan Africa.

While the United States is known for providing extraordinary assistance to 15 countries severely affected by HIV/AIDS through the

president's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief program, Ralph is concerned that Black America is not getting PEPFAR-level support.

"I am happy there is PEPFAR but how many times does the CDC have to report that over half of all new HIV infections are occurring among African Americans before we do something about it?" she asked. "HIV/AIDS threatens the very future of Blacks right here in America."

In stepping with her activism work, Ralph and her husband State Sen. Vincent Hughes recently launched a new Web site titled www.testtogether.org.

The site is a part of a campaign aimed at getting couples to get tested for HIV together.

Ralph's push for a demonstration comes at a time when more than 30 national HIV/AIDS organizations and leaders representing African American,

Latino, Native American/Alaska Native and Asian and Pacific Islander communities recently joined forces to call for a comprehensive national AIDS strategy.

The organizations are calling on presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain to support a national AIDS strategy.

The organizations agreed on a seven-point action plan and stress the need for the next

administration to rapidly initiate an AIDS strategy that engages the entire federal government in the fight against the epidemic.

The action plan also demands that the federal government improve its data gathering methods that currently account for only 33 out of the 50 states and five dependent territories, excluding other states and territories impacted by the epidemic.