



## Sisters Doin' It for Themselves

**FOUNDED BY WOMEN FOR WOMEN** in 1993, New York City's Iris House provides a bounty of HIV-related services and programs. The organization's executive director, Ingrid Floyd, speaks about the challenges facing her nonprofit and the busy HIV-positive women with whom she works—many are juggling kids, work, and relationships.

**What services does Iris House provide?** We deliver comprehensive services that include food and nutrition, and we have counselors and nutritionists on site. We do case management; we do behavioral health. We offer psychotherapy groups, support groups, housing services. We have apartments where our clients live. We do a host of prevention services in the community, including condom distribution and HIV rapid testing.

**Have you noticed an increase in women seeking your assistance in the past year?** Due to the recession, we definitely have more people accessing our

nutrition counseling and meals. In many cases, women are heads of households, and due to rising costs of food, we're seeing more women coming in for those nutrition services. We try to give people healthy food items, specifically immune-boosting foods like produce and lean proteins that they can't normally afford if they're on public assistance. We remind women that they need to be healthy to care for their family—that requires sticking to their medical regimens and seeing their doctor regularly.

**In your time with Iris House, have you witnessed a change in the stigma affecting HIV-positive**

**women?** The stigma definitely still exists, specifically in communities of color. We serve black and Latino women who, because of their culture, still do not discuss issues related to HIV. Many of the women, especially those who are newly diagnosed or new to treatment, still believe it's a death sentence. We work with them to understand there are women living with the virus for over 25 years. Another stigma that exists is that women with the disease believe they can't have children. We work to convince them you can still be a mother.

**Have women grown more comfortable speaking with their partners about HIV?** No. Once we work with people through some of our prevention intervention, they're more comfortable talking about both HIV and condom use. Some of our women in relationships aren't comfortable initiating conversations or asking their partners to use condoms because they don't want their partners to think they're cheating.

**Have there been any scientific or medical advances concerning women and HIV that have made you more optimistic?** Rapid testing is one of the best advances in the last few years of the epidemic—now more people are willing to be tested. The microbicides and the vaccines—there's a lot of hope these things will move along, but I'm not as optimistic about how soon they will be available to the community.

**What kind of prevention and treatment messages really resonate with the women you work with?** The women we serve are more inclined to pay attention when they see ads and billboards reflecting their culture. Oftentimes, if the person in the message doesn't look like them, they don't think it applies to them—especially since so much of the messaging around HIV has been focused on gay men.

**What do you think of the graphic "It's Never Just HIV" campaign by the New York City Department of Health (see page 8)?** I have mixed reactions every time I see it. One thought is that at least it's getting the message into households. But the imagery of the advertisement and the fact that it stereotypes what types of illnesses people with HIV may or may not have—that troubles me. ❖