

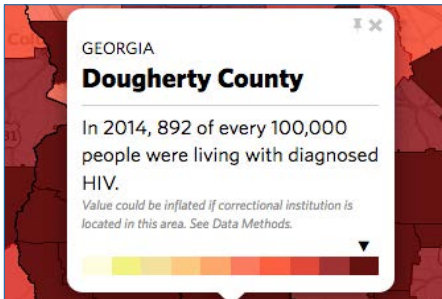
Testing Success at Walgreen's

"So many people showed up that the pharmacist asked 'Oh my gosh, where are all these people coming from?'"

In honor of National HIV Testing Day,

Debra Wallace, the HIV EIS worker at New Beginnings in Thomasville, collaborated Walgreen's and the SW Georgia HIV/AIDS Program to produce an HIV testing and awareness event in Albany. She and her partners began planning the event three months in advance. They put the word out via social media and during the event, a DJ from WJIZ, Miss Monique, broadcast live from Walgreen's, encouraging listeners to be tested and taking the test herself. So many people showed up that the pharmacist asked 'Oh my gosh, where are all these people coming from?'"

Debra says part of the reason for the turnout is that people are aware of the high rate of HIV in Albany.



Albany is the county seat of Dougherty County. Pictured left is an image from AIDSvu (www.AIDSvu.org) a site that can help clients understand the risk of HIV where they live.

HIV information and condoms were handed out. Gift bags and a selfie wall helped set a festive tone. "No one complained about the wait. People took selfies; they laughed and talked to each other. They were just having themselves a good time," says Debra.

Over three days, HIV workers tested a total of 223 individuals. Debra provided testing to 27 of those. "To see so many people coming in for an HIV test was wonderful," says Debra.



Debra Wallace (3rd from left) poses in front of the selfie wall with the testing team.

Testing was organized much like the "take a number" system at the DMV: a staff member gave a numbered ticket to each person awaiting a test. When a tester was ready, a number was called out, and that individual escorted to the next available tester.

Working in a small, private space, Debra spent time helping people understand what behaviors put them at the greatest risk and explored what steps they might be interested in taking to reduce their risk.

Whether she's testing at Walgreens or serving a client at a drug and alcohol center, Debra takes the long view. "Just because someone took a test doesn't mean that they're going to use condoms. It can take a long time to change behavior. That's why, for me, it's about relationships. I always give clients some kind of little motivational something, like a wrist band with the serenity prayer, something to let them know that somebody cares. When they're ready to make a change, I want them to know that I am here for them." ■