

## THE SITUATION ROOM

### **World AIDS Day Is Tomorrow Aired November 30, 2005 - 17:00 ET**

Tomorrow is World AIDS Day, designed to call attention to the global fight against HIV and AIDS. In this country, the disease is taking a heavy toll on one group in particular.

Ali Velshi is joining us now with more on this story -- Ali.

ALI VELSHI, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Hey, Wolf.

And that group in particular is African-American women. A lot of people think AIDS is a problem that is going away in America. But the Centers For Disease Control have said that, even though the rate of infection among African-Americans as a whole are down, poverty and other factors are contributing to an alarming rate of HIV infection in African-American women.

IDA BYTHER-SMITH, HIV POSITIVE: I was literally dying.

VELSHI (voice-over): Ida Byther-Smith remembers her shock the day she took a routine blood test and found out she had HIV.

BYTHER-SMITH: You made a mistake on my name when I walked in, so I know you got the wrong person.

VELSHI: But it was true. Seventeen years ago, she was infected by her husband, who left her for another man. After a long period of shame and silence...

BYTHER-SMITH: I thought I was going to cut my wrists. VELSHI: ... Ida told her family, forgave her husband, and nursed him for three years, until his death. She now works to prevent AIDS among African-American women, a highly vulnerable group, according to the Centers For Disease Control.

HIV is the leading cause of death in African-American women age 25 to 34. Black women are 21 times more likely to be diagnosed with HIV than white women. And 76 percent of all women are infected through heterosexual sex.

BETHSHEBA JOHNSON, LUCK CARE CENTER: Your viral load is really out of control. And...

VELSHI: On the front lines is Bethsheba Johnson, a nurse who runs a clinic for AIDS patients on Chicago's South Side.

JOHNSON: Hey.

VELSHI: She says, every day, she sees why HIV cases are up among African-American women.

JOHNSON: We don't like to think of our -- our partners as being bisexual or gay. We don't want to think of our men possibly incarcerated having sex with other men. It -- it's just a lot denial: "My man wouldn't do that."

VELSHI: Health officials believe some ex-offenders go back and infect their wives and girlfriends. Other men may have multiple sex partners, putting women at risk. Bethsheba says women still assume that AIDS is just a gay white male disease.

JOHNSON: Or, "It just won't happen to me," if you're young. "I'm invincible."

BYTHER-SMITH: I wasn't a prostitute. I wasn't a gay white man. I wasn't on drugs. People think they can see HIV. You can't see HIV.

VELSHI: For Ida, the answer lies in empowering African-American women. That means educating themselves and practicing safe sex...

BYTHER-SMITH: You have got to confront something before you can fight it. We have got to acknowledge that this is happening.

VELSHI: ... and never have a false sense of security.

BYTHER-SMITH: We need to look in the mirror and say, this is the face of HIV.

VELSHI: Well, experts, Wolf, tell us that other risk factors associated with poverty, like lack of good access to health care, domestic and sexual abuse, and lack of adequate awareness about sexually transmitted diseases, make the HIV threat worse among African-American women than in the population as a whole -- Wolf.

BLITZER: Ali Velshi reporting for us -- Ali, thanks very much.