

People in Florida's latest Zika 'hot zone' want more buzz

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In this photo taken Tuesday, Oct. 18, 2016, Rep. Frederica Wilson, D-Fla., left, talks to Sha Qureshi, right, as she hands out a box of Insect Repellent towelettes in the Little Haiti area of Miami. Aggressive mosquito control efforts are being used in Miami's newest Zika "hot zone." The area includes parts of two of Miami's poorest neighborhoods, Liberty City and Little Haiti. (AP Photo/Alan Diaz)

Mosquitoes bite everyone, not just Haitians. It's a point health educator Marie-Jose Ledan is sure to make when she approaches Little Haiti's churches, laundromats and mom-and-pop businesses about protecting

people from the Zika virus.

That seems obvious, but many in Miami's newest Zika "hot zone" bitterly remember what happened the last time health officials linked a devastating virus to this community: Discrimination and recrimination against Haitians continued for years after the federal government wrongly listed being Haitian as a risk factor for HIV and AIDS.

"That's why we have to be careful so our sisters and brothers do not think they are targeted, just like with the AIDS virus," said Ledan, who has been distributing educational materials about Zika in Little Haiti over the last two months.

Authorities in Florida went into damage-control mode when Zika-carrying mosquitoes began biting in the Miami area this summer. Many feared the economy would suffer as pregnant women were warned to avoid the Wynwood art district and touristy South Beach.

With those areas cleared, some fear this third "hot zone" is getting less attention. It straddles the city's poorest communities, heavily black Little Haiti and Liberty City. Here, Zika joins a long list of concerns among people who already feel neglected and tend to mistrust authorities. Advocates say containing its spread here will take finesse.

Most of the same aggressive tactics deployed against mosquitoes in the other two areas are being used here as well: Inspectors are making thousands of house calls, trucks are spraying pesticides before dawn and tropical plants that trap water where mosquitoes breed will be pulled from city-owned spaces.

But there are no plans yet for the aerial spraying done in the other two neighborhoods. The county's mayor said last week that it isn't necessary, because the number of Zika-carrying mosquitoes caught in traps hasn't

been alarmingly high. Still, people in these neighborhoods suspect they're being shortchanged, and organizers are concerned that poor women won't get the help they need.

Activists also felt slighted when the governor and county mayor called this zone "the Little River area," using a historical name for an overlapping neighborhood, despite the city commission's May resolution recognizing that the name of Little Haiti is as culturally important to Miami as the more widely known "Little Havana."

"We have to be very careful in talking, to send the right message," Ledan said.

Florida health officials linked an eighth Zika infection on Wednesday to this latest "hot zone." It's not known whether any of these people are pregnant, but high-risk pregnancies and infant mortality rates are already higher in the area, even without the threat of Zika-related birth defects, according to Manuel Fermin, CEO of the Healthy Start Coalition of Miami-Dade.

"Now we're adding another major problem," he said.

This latest 1-square-mile transmission zone was identified this month, but the coalition was already worried about it months ago. It's just three miles from Wynwood, where Florida's first Zika infections from local mosquito bites were verified. And few of its residents were among the mostly affluent women who were initially getting tested after Florida made Zika-testing free for all pregnant women statewide.

Case managers suspected important information hadn't reached families in Liberty City and Little Haiti, where barriers to prenatal care include not just the cost of services, but also a lack of transportation to appointments, child care or paid time off from work.

"Are we getting the people we need to be getting?" Fermin said. "The majority of the women who came in were from a higher socio-economic area, and more were tourists who had been in that area."

Leroy Jones said he feels his community has been left on its own to deal with Zika. He appreciated that U.S. Rep. Frederica Wilson, a Democrat whose district includes both Liberty City and Little Haiti, helped distribute mosquito repellent and information about Zika prevention to local businesses.

But Jones said he's disappointed that the groups who protested against aerial pesticide spraying over South Beach had not come to see what kind of help his community needed.

"Like most things in this country, the rich get taken care of immediately and poor people is always forgot," said Jones, who leads an organization that supports inner-city businesses. "It's sad to say, but I'm speaking from my heart."

Gov. Rick Scott did meet Friday with local officials at a Catholic school. This zone is primarily residential, unlike the other two, but Scott said he's as committed to stopping Zika's spread there as he has been in tourist destinations.

The students told the governor what they had been instructed to tell their parents: Wear repellent outside, and drain the standing water mosquitoes need to breed.

Spreading the word through students this way is the kind of outreach community advocates say works best in neighborhoods where people rely on word of mouth for information and may be suspicious of government officials knocking on doors.

"They're afraid to open the door because it might be immigration," said Ledan, who is working with Planned Parenthood to canvass the neighborhood.

At the Liberty City beauty supply store where Jasmin Qureshi's husband works, more and more women talk about wearing long sleeves to prevent mosquito bites. But in Miami's long hot season, hardly any customers actually cover up, Qureshi said.

She was grateful for the box of mosquito repellent wipes that her congresswoman hand-delivered to the store last week, but said she would feel better if they got the same aerial spraying and attention that Wynwood and South Beach got.

"It would be better if they do more stuff with the plane and everything. We need more protection—as much protection as possible—to get it out of our area," Qureshi said.

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