EAST LANSING - They gathered in a large room in the basement of the Student Services Building at Michigan State University. The contingent of student and local leaders looked like a diverse classroom settling in for a lecture on literature or math, but in reality they were there to teach.

They were there to take the test for HIV. After some initial statements about the importance of the event, the 20 leaders gathered around for a photo opportunity before being whisked off by certified testers from the Lansing Area AIDS Network and Olin Health Center for private counseling sessions.

After the counseling sessions, each leader opened his or her mouth, rubbed the inside of the cheek with an instrument that looked like an over-sized cotton swab and then held it in the mouth for two minutes. When that was done, each swab was dropped into a labeled test tube that will be sent off for testing for HIV antibodies. The results are expected to be returned in about one week and, like the counseling before the tests, will remain confidential.

The gathering was pulled together by the Alliance of Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgender Students of MSU to bring attention to the continuing increases of HIV cases in youth and to encourage all students to get tested for the virus.

"It's important to know your status and it's important to get tested," said Justin Lippi, program director of the ALBGTS and the event organizer. "And that's what we're here to do. We're here to set an example. We're here to de-stigmatize the testing process."

Lippi and other leaders pointed to statistics from the state health department that show about 20 percent of HIV cases in Ingham County occur in those aged 13-24. In addition, health experts note that 21 percent of people infected with the virus do not know they have it.

Alex Spike, president of MSU's Interfraternity Council, said the Greek system felt addressing HIV was important.

"We came at this with guns blazing because it is a serious concern for the collegiate population in general," Spike said. "As you can hear, I have a little bit of a cold. A cold spreads easily on campus. I assume other things do too."

Megan Garrett from Radiating Excellence in All Areas of Life (R.E.A.A.L.), an MSU student group supporting minority women, said she was there to encourage testing because of the disproportionate impact of HIV on African-American women ages 15-28. A fact sheet from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention supports Garrett's concerns.

"I came today because AIDS is something I feel is really taking over my generation," she said.

Christopher Kulesza, chair of the Academic Assembly of the Associated Students of MSU, the student government's legislative branch, said he felt doing a public HIV test was important.
"(HIV is) an issue that affects everybody, not just an issue that affects certain members of a community," said Kulesza, who was being tested for HIV for the first time. "The risks are very real. They are very broad."

He urged others to get tested for their own health and safety, whether they think they are at risk or not.

Joining the student leaders were Lansing City Council member Brian Jeffries and East Lansing Mayor Vic Loomis.

Jeffries said he was participating because HIV is being "swept under the rug."

HIV and AIDS are "an issue that everybody kind of whispers about," Jeffries said. "We have to make every effort we can to mainstream this" and get rid of the fears and stigma surrounding the test.

"Activities like this bring that to the light," he added.

Loomis focused on the role of elected officials "to look out for the health, safety and well-being of their citizens. That is something I have taken very seriously," he said, citing his participation in a "healthy mayors" challenge starting last year. HIV testing is a part of being healthy, he said.

Those participating in the event challenged the student leadership of the universities in the Big 10 and all Michigan colleges and universities to join them in getting tested as an example for all students.