

## Right Step Recovery Program opens in Portland

An inpatient chemical dependency unit for gay men and lesbians, the second in the nation and the first on the West Coast, has been opened in Portland by a major national health care corporation.

Right Step Recovery Program begins processing its first clients this week into the 32-

**Health**

bed unit which includes a predominantly gay/lesbian management, staff and treatment plan.

"If lifestyle issues aren't dealt with in depth, and I am speaking here specifically of gay and lesbian lifestyle issues, then the gay or lesbian addict/alcoholic has little chance of staying clean and sober once he or she leaves treatment," said Administrator Christopher Eskeli.

The gay community has traditionally been ignored for its special lifestyle needs and issues by the health care industry. Eskeli said that addressing sexuality, home life and related social issues like AIDS and discrimination are an integral part of the Right Step approach.

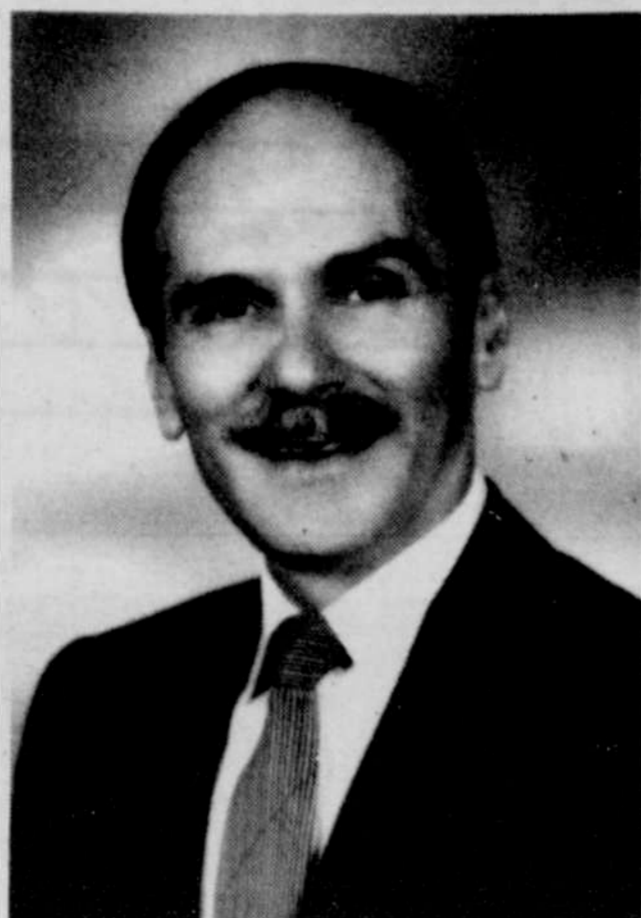
Eskeli, a candid and open gay man, is frank when discussing his own bouts with chemical dependency and internalized homophobia:

"1978 was the year I died and went to hell. After having worked in the chemical dependency field for almost eight years, I had come to the point in my life where I was 'sick and tired of being sick and tired.' Drugs and alcohol were playing an increasingly important part in my life. Yet I was paralyzed with fear about receiving help or treatment for my disease.

"It was easy to tell my clients and patients what they needed to do, but it was difficult to follow my own advice. I knew that if I did take the step and enter treatment, I would have to begin dealing with *all* of my life issues, and there was one that perhaps caused me as much fear as my addiction. That was my gayness."

Eskeli entered a respected hospital-based treatment program. After completing preliminary procedures — detox, etc. — he attended his first group therapy session where he was reproofed for attempting to deal with his sexuality as well as his addiction.

"I went into the session and told the patients and staff that my name was Chris, and that I was an addict and an alcoholic. 'But there is something else I need to deal with,' I said. 'I am also gay, and need to talk about my drug and alcohol addiction and how it relates to my gay lifestyle.' At this point the therapist



Christopher Eskeli

who was conducting the group looked at me and said, 'You do not need to deal with your gayness here. Deal with your addiction first, and after you have been clean and sober for a year or so you can begin looking at your sexuality.'"

A veteran of the chemical dependency wars on both sides, Eskeli suggests that if lifestyle issues aren't dealt with in depth, then the gay or lesbian addict/alcoholic has little chance of staying clean and sober once he or she leaves treatment.

Even when the staff of a traditional treatment program is gay-sensitive, gays often find it very difficult to continue in the program. Straight patients often make it difficult for the gay patient to feel at ease talking about intimate lifestyle issues. Gay partners, if they attend the family program, also often find it difficult to discuss relationship issues. Also, some gay people's internalized homophobia contributes to stress, and the development of chemical dependency and makes it more difficult for them to stay sober after treatment. Gay people may also hide behind sexual identity as an excuse for their dependency problem.

A program especially for gays can better deal with all of these problems. Meeting the specific needs of the gay chemically dependent person will be Right Step Recovery Program, which opens in Portland, Oregon, on October 15, 1986. This program will be the first inpatient program of its kind on the West Coast.

Parent company Republic Health Corp. selected the Portland area for this West Coast pilot program over other more likely locations, like San Francisco, for several reasons, according to Eskeli.

"A large gay and lesbian population, a

healthy economy, a central location relative to California, Alaska, Idaho and the West, are some of the reasons," he said.

Republic, the largest privately held health care company in the United States, also owns the two Horizon Recovery Centers, Riverside Hospital and Riverside East, an adolescent treatment center.

"Our staff is composed of the finest medical and clinical professionals available and have come to Right Step from treatment programs all over the United States. We are forming a team dedicated to a unique, quality-oriented chemical dependency program," Eskeli said.

The program encourages, but does not force, "coming out," when that is desirable. Elaborate safeguards insure the privacy of all patients.

Right Step also deals with the problems of AIDS. The issue is important to alcohol and chemical dependents for several reasons. The disease is spread by drug abusers through

the use of shared hypodermic needles. Also, alcoholics and addicts are at greater risk of the disease because abuse can also lead to poor judgement and unsafe sex practices.

Right Step Recovery Program will treat persons diagnosed with AIDS but is not equipped to handle those who are seriously ill. Disease control guidelines are followed closely. Emphasis is placed on building up the immune system through sound nutrition for all patients, and safe sexual practices are taught. Recreational and activity therapy are also emphasized in the program.

Right Step's carefully selected staff — a mixture of gays and straights, recovering and non-recovering — are professionals who are excited about this unique opportunity to provide treatment to a minority that has long been ignored in many mainstream treatment programs.

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