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just news

Problems plague House of Light AIDS care facility opens despite controversy and questions

BY ROSANNE KING

Just Out's most important responsibilities are to its community and readers. We strive to be accurate, objective and fair. The truth becomes more important when we report on controversy in our own community.

The House of Light (HOL), a fledgling care facility for people with AIDS, is certainly controversial. It could provide desperately needed services, but serious questions are being asked about HOL's financial solvency and ability to deliver necessary services. Just Out intends to investigate all sides of this story, and will publish a follow-up article in the August edition.

The House of Light Villa Rose Residential Care Facility (HOL) officially opened June 18, but controversy and concern surround the care center for people with AIDS.

HOL is a 15-bed facility for clients requiring 24-hour care. Potential residents will be screened by an HOL medical board to ensure eligibility for services. According to HOL representatives, clients will benefit from educational, recreational and counseling services. There are seven other residential care facilities in the greater Portland area, according to Oregon AIDS Hotline. HOL is the largest.

Two major issues have surfaced in the controversy surrounding the center. The first revolves around the question of HOL's financial stability and ability to remain solvent over the long term. The second issue is based on concerns that HOL will not be able to adequately provide necessary services to clients.

Concern over these issues precipitated resignation of HOL's entire board of directors on May 17. According to minutes of a board meeting held that day, "irreconcilable differences" existed between the board and HOL executive director Jeri I. Hendricks.

The minutes itemize several points of contention regarding finances:

• Hendricks had estimated costs of 90-day start-up period at \$78,000, with a completely volunteer nursing staff. According to the board, HOL had \$99.26 in its checking account on April 26, and "no committed grants or donations to provide funding of the start-up costs."

• HOL entered a lease/buy agreement for the facility in November 1988 with the Sisters of the Good Shepard. The Sisters require, under the existing contract, a \$100,000 payment 90 days after HOL receives its occupancy permit. The permit was issued June 1. HOL raised approximately \$52,000, mostly in donations, in 1989-90.

• As of April 15, HOL's total indebtedness was \$150,982.80. That included unpaid payroll and related taxes.

According to the board, the budget showed that a projected debt service of \$20,000 monthly to the Sisters couldn't be paid, even at fully reimbursed occupancy. They estimated that "at least \$20,000" per month in community donations would be required to support the real estate debt service. Residents will pay about \$1800 per month.

(Following review of the HOL financial picture, the board concluded that "even when fully operative and fully reimbursed, HOL would be running at a \$32,000 monthly deficit.")

The Board unanimously agreed that it did not "foresee that community support will be sufficient to both purchase this amount of real estate and fund the needed services to HIV-diseased and AIDS-afflicted individuals."

Joni Topper, chairwoman of the resigning board, stressed her concern that HOL could not provide important services necessary for care facility residents.

"Is it really a service organization?" she asked. "There is a vision that does make sense... at one point it was viable idea. Given the right people, it could work. We need the right people and the right location."

She said that many people had worked diligently toward HOL's vision of pioneering new concepts in community health care. Many have also withdrawn their support in face in HOL's considerable difficulties.

The adequacy of resident care also concerned the state care facility licensing agency when HOL initially applied for its license. Oregon State Senior and Disabled Services issued HOL's license June 1. According to Cindy Hannum, division manager of client care, that license is currently under review.

HOL has appointed a new board of directors, and Hendricks has assumed the position of chairwoman. Due to an out-of-town emergency, Hendricks was not available for comment at press time.

However, Hendricks did send a letter to the former board just two days before their May 17 resignation. She makes allegations that the board's decision not to proceed with the facility "was made without my knowledge and presented as a done deal, not open to discussion." Hendricks wrote that information she had furnished to the board was not "received with an open mind."

"I also feel that due to the focus on financial concerns of board members they have lost the purpose of why the HOL was founded," the letter stated.

Further comments from Hendricks and a complete update on the status of House of Light will appear in the August issue.

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