

**H**ealth officials in Oregon are instituting a series of prosocial events around the state designed to help gay and bisexual men make healthy decisions around HIV-risk reduction, counseling and testing, and safer-sex behaviors.

The events are part of the Pathfinder Project, an outgrowth of intensive focus-group discussions held several times during 1995. The groups consisted of health department staff and gay and bisexual men from throughout Oregon.

"What we learned from those focus groups is that while the vast majority of men know the facts about HIV and AIDS, many continued to embark upon unsafe behaviors," explains David Lane, Ph.D., coordinator of community-based programs for the Oregon Health Division. "The piece that appeared to be missing was a social support network that can give men that critical sense of community and positive self-esteem which may in turn help them sustain healthy behaviors."

According to Lane, there are two basic tenets of the Pathfinder Project: one is the belief that gay and bisexual men can and will make positive choices regarding their health if they have the right information and psychological support; the other maintains that self-esteem and connections to a positive support system are paramount to the psychological support necessary for people to sustain healthy behaviors.

He says the term "pathfinder" reflects public health's role in supporting gay and bisexual men in finding the best individual path for health. The belief is that there is no "one best way" to keep every man safe—instead, each man must find his own path.

"Changing one's behavior—and sustaining that—is not easy. This is not only true of HIV/AIDS issues, but for tobacco use, violence and other unhealthy behaviors," says Dr. David Fleming, the state epidemiologist.

Last March, *Just Out* reported that data from an ongoing study involving 1,600 Portland men who identify as gay or bisexual found that up to 30 percent were engaging in extremely high-risk sex on a regular basis.

And though many gay and bisexual men have been exposed to some type of HIV-prevention material, numerous studies indicate that that population appears to be involved in risky sexual practices at higher rates in the mid-1990s than it was in the late 1980s. According to OHD, more than 80 percent of the overall reported AIDS cases in Oregon involve men who have had sex with men.

"Clearly it is not enough to just provide the information about the risks," says Fleming, "you also have to build a person's self-esteem, which often develops through prosocial activities. It is a lesson that public health is learning."

Oregon could very well be leading the way in transforming that common-sense philosophy into public health policy.

According to Lane, Oregon has received \$166,000 in supplemental funds from the federal Centers for Disease Control specifically to build the capacity of community-based organizations to conduct outreach into the gay community.

Funds were awarded to local health departments that entered into contracts with the community-based organizations. Among the recipient organizations are: Clatsop County AIDS Coalition, which received \$12,620 to hire an outreach

## Oregon goes prosocial

*The Oregon Health Division is altering its approach to helping gay and bisexual men stay HIV negative*

by Inga Sorensen

coordinator; the Eugene-based MPowerment Project, which received \$19,948, also to hire a gay outreach coordinator; Valley AIDS Information Network in Corvallis, which received \$5,016 to

According to Willeford, SOMO gatherings—which have attracted as many as 125 men—give participants a chance to meet one another and build upon those relationships. During their



Men meeting at Cascade AIDS Project in 1995

fund prosocial meetings for gay and bisexual men; the Portland-based Cascade AIDS Project, which got \$18,840 to expand its Speak to Your Brothers project to men of color communities; and Southern Oregon Men's Outreach, known as SOMO, in Jackson County, which got \$18,100 to hire an outreach coordinator.

"I can't tell you what a difference it has made in this community. It's phenomenal," says Jim Willeford, a gay activist who lives in Jackson County. He helped establish SOMO several

*There are two basic tenets of the Pathfinder Project: one is the belief that gay and bisexual men can and will make positive choices regarding their health if they have the right information and psychological support; the other maintains that self-esteem and connections to a positive support system are paramount to the psychological support necessary for people to sustain healthy behaviors.*

months ago, when the Pathfinder Project was taking root. "There was no place for men to get together to socialize and network. Now we have a monthly newsletter [with a 280-person mailing list] and a social gathering for men the first Saturday of every month. Every three months we have a special event."

monthly gatherings, men watch movies, play games, chat, eat, and simply get an opportunity to enjoy each others' company.

"That may not sound like a big deal to someone living in an urban area, but if you're living in a small town or a rural place—trust me, it is a big deal," he says.

During a recent SOMO meeting, counselors were brought in to assist men who wanted to express their feelings surrounding the murders of Roxanne Ellis and Michelle Abdill, a lesbian

couple who lived in Medford. Some men, including Willeford, were friends with the women.

"We would not have been able to do this before," says Willeford. "I now have men coming up to me and saying that [SOMO] saved their lives, because if they didn't have a place to go, they might be in the park or rest stop."

In addition to promoting prosocial activities, OHD has provided financial backing for the creation of the Gay Resource Connection. Lane says Oregon is the first state to have a publicly funded hot line for the sexual minorities community aimed at providing social support.

OHD has been funding a statewide AIDS hot line for some time, but listings specifically about gay and lesbian resources have only recently been included, hence the Gay Resource Connection. The statewide hot line is a program of CAP.

"We are at the point where more than 10 percent of our total calls deal strictly with gay issues," says Tom Richardson, the hot line coordinator. "From July through December, we received 160 calls about gay cultural events, 138 calls around gay support and educational issues, 25 calls with questions about gay professional services, 15 calls about gay political groups, 20 calls regarding gay youth, and 55 calls from people with general questions."

Richardson says many of those calls are from small-town and rural Oregon.

"We get calls like, 'I'm 22 and I know I'm gay but I live in Lane County or Bend, is there a gay group out here?'" Those kinds of questions," he says. "We do a lot of referrals to PFLAG. We're still in the process of gathering our database, but so far it has been a tremendously positive experience."

An estimated 40 volunteers staff the hot line.

Another first, says Lane, is the recent release of a Portland Gay Men's Chorus compact disc entitled *Breaking the Silence with Song*, which was underwritten by the Washington County Health and Human Service Department and OHD.

Included in the CD package is a statement written by former Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts, a long-time friend of the lesbian and gay community: "The music, words and message of the disc present a story of living with—and through—an epidemic which has touched so many lives," she writes. "We hope that the message provided on this recording inspires you to get involved in fighting HIV disease.... Through our continued collective

efforts, our goal is to end the AIDS epidemic. And public health in Oregon is committed to working with all aspects of our communities to meet that goal."

"This is a very exciting time," says Lane. "We've learned some lessons about what does and doesn't work with respect to HIV prevention, and we're building from there."

*The Gay Resource Connection and AIDS Hot Line telephone number is 223-2437; dial 1-800-777-2437 outside the Portland metropolitan and Southwest Washington areas. The hot line is soliciting volunteers for a training to be held Feb. 10, 11, 17 and 18. Volunteers must fill out an application and are expected to handle one four-hour shift per week for a minimum of six months. Applications may be obtained by calling the above numbers.*

*OHD is seeking men who wish to become health advocates in their communities, and want to learn ways to provide prosocial prevention events and activities at a local level. Call David Lane at (503) 731-4029 for more information.*

*For a copy of PGMC's new CD, Breaking the Silence with Song, call PGMC at 699-8586.*

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER