

and largest AIDS service organization, shut down abruptly on Feb. 28, leaving its 2,600 clients in the lurch. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* reports that agency board members convened an emergency meeting to address financial problems uncovered by a two-month audit conducted by county officials and decided to file for liquidation under Chapter 7 bankruptcy laws. That means all the agency's assets, including its \$1.9 million building, will be sold to pay its debts. Effective March 3, the county health department transferred SDAF's federal contracts to other service providers and established a hot line to provide referrals for the agency's former clients.

After the county's audit revealed \$331,500 in unpaid and undocumented bills for which the foundation was reimbursed with federal funds, SDAF was given a week to produce receipts, but county officials said the irregularities were so egregious that cancellation of the agency's contracts was imminent. The audit also found that some \$400,000 was owed to more than 80 vendors and that the agency had exhausted its \$200,000 line of credit.

Internal efforts to rescue the agency—including staff and program cuts and stepped-up fund raising—unfortunately came too late. In December most of the board members resigned, in response to the demands of a staff concerned by hints of major financial problems. No one has suggested that theft or embezzlement led to the foundation's demise.

HIV-prevention ad campaign stirs up old controversy

On Feb. 25, AIDS Partnership Michigan unveiled an advertising campaign designed to stop the spread of HIV among teens, young white gay men, African American men and intravenous drug users—groups targeted by the agency in light of state health department statistics showing, among other things, that in Michigan AIDS is the No. 1 killer of black men age 25 to 44. But with some sexual minority community leaders already objecting to one ad and more protests expected, the organization may become the new center of an ongoing debate weighing the requirements of high-impact, effective and focused advertising against the need not to alienate anyone from participating in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The ads, which convey messages developed with the input of focus groups representing the four targeted populations, are funded by private donations and began appearing on billboards in the Detroit metropolitan area in early March (and will eventually be found on buses and in newspapers as well). Some gay and lesbian activists have complained about an ad depicting two shirtless twentysomething men embracing with the message, "We're hoping for some negative responses." Activists fear that not all viewers will understand the ad refers to negative HIV test results rather than negative responses to gay couples. AIDS Partnership defends the ad's bluntness, saying its purpose is to stop the spread of HIV, not to address prejudice.

Another ad shows nearly naked teenagers intertwined above a list of "Ways You Can Get AIDS," including descriptions of anal and oral sex. The ad is planned for placement on smaller billboards near schools. Gateway Outdoor Advertising has donated some of the billboards because it says it believes in the campaign's message.

Laws may change, but public opinion hasn't

A poll conducted by the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* shows residents of Hawaii are by a strong majority opposed to legalizing same-gender marriage. As in a similar poll last year, 70 percent of respondents oppose legal recognition of same-sex unions and 55 percent disapprove of granting

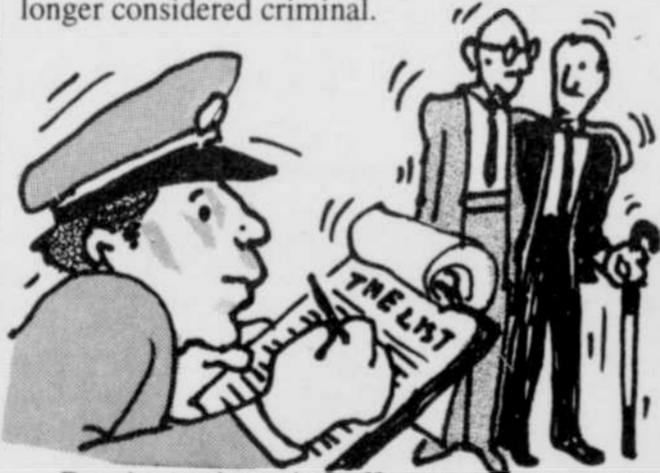
limited marital benefits to queer couples. Meanwhile, the state Senate and House have both authorized constitutional amendments to outlaw homosexual marriages and are attempting to hammer out a compromise on the issue of limited benefits.

While approving its version of the amendment, the Hawaii House of Representatives passed a companion bill granting four marital benefits to gay and lesbian couples who register as "reciprocal beneficiaries." The Senate, however, seeks to confer a much broader package of more than 200 state benefits, in order to pre-empt legal challenges to such provisions based on the state Supreme Court's 1993 ruling on marriage and equal rights. The Senate proposal would allow registered couples to file state tax returns jointly.

The *Star-Bulletin* poll yielded some additional statistics: 27 percent of Democrats versus 3 percent of Republicans favor legalization of queer marriages; almost twice as many women support it as men; and 35 percent of Caucasians supported, while 85 percent of Filipinos opposed, same-gender unions. On the subject of limited marital benefits, the gap between men and women lessened significantly; 50 percent of Democrats were in favor vs. 26 percent of Republicans; and 51 percent of Caucasians approved, along with 43 percent of Filipinos, while 59 percent of ethnic Japanese disapproved.

Megan's Law misfires amid decades of red tape

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* in February exposed myriad problems with California's hopelessly inaccurate sex-offender registry and law enforcement's attempts to implement a newly established statute called Megan's Law. One of the problems is that men arrested by police in the 1940s, '50s and '60s for seeking or engaging in consensual sex with other men are listed as registered sex offenders, even though their conduct is no longer considered criminal.



Despite an intensive effort two years ago to overhaul the list, state Department of Justice officials acknowledge that vague, decades-old criminal records and changed statutes governing sexual behavior make it difficult for them to know which offender did what, and thus who really belongs on the list. All of that makes a law enacted last fall—that calls for the creation of a publicly available CD-ROM database showing the names, photographs and ZIP codes of California's 57,000 most dangerous sex offenders—a quagmire for the state and a nightmare for men, some now in their 90s, who were arrested for having consensual sex with other men.

As dozens of states have passed versions of Megan's Law, named for a New Jersey girl allegedly murdered by a paroled molester, reports have surfaced nationwide of gay men and others landing on sex offender registers even though their crimes have nothing to do with rape or molestation. There is particular cause for concern in California, where for many years registration laws were used to monitor homosexuals. Police later used the list of sex offenders for tracking child molesters—without removing names from the list's previous uses.

According to state Department of Justice officials, by the 1990s as much as 60 percent of the information on registrants was inaccurate.

Compiled by Christopher D. Cuttone



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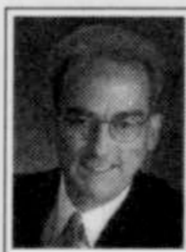
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