

always room for improvement in the treatment of their brothers with HIV and AIDS.

HIV-positive inmates who spoke to *Just Out* said they receive all FDA-approved drugs consistently with community-based treatment protocols.

But still they fear the ignorance of other inmates. Andrew Boyer shudders as he recounts a recent experience in the OSP infirmary where he says inmate orderlies wouldn't touch his sheets and sprayed surfaces he touched with disinfectant.

Knox says Boyer's fears are "legitimate," but adds "those attitudes are unacceptable and constitute grounds for firing."

Increased funding for inmate job training and supervision, along with the creation of an OSP hospice, provide some hope of improved conditions for ailing inmates.

"Systemic changes have happened because of these guys," says Jack Cox with the HIV Advocacy Council of Oregon. "They've brought awareness of the stuff happening in prisons to the larger AIDS community. Before they began organizing, there was no interface between these parallel systems, no voice for inmates."

Cox first visited HAAP on World AIDS Day in 1997 as a guest speaker. Since then, his organization has provided fiscal sponsorship for donations to HAAP and is now representing the program at policy and planning forums.

White welcomes the involvement of community volunteers and supporters. A base of support

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—Charles White

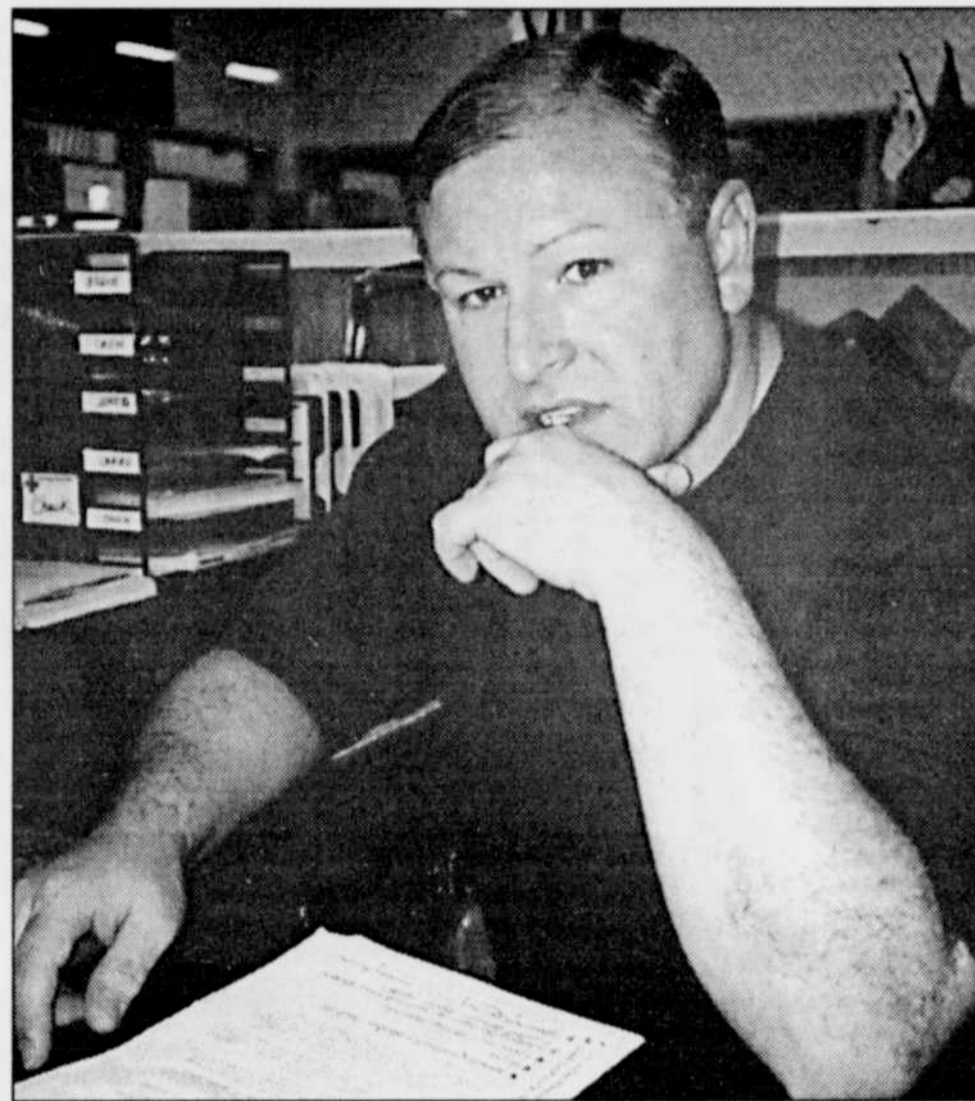


PHOTO BY HOLLY PRUETT

independent of DOC is crucial to a program that, as White says, "walks a fine line between the confines of what staff permits, and building trust and credibility with a recalcitrant prison population."

White and other HAAP leaders are known for getting things done. "These guys are great," says one peer educator. "They don't recognize barriers."

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When your every move is monitored and much of your time is spent locked down, when you're preaching behavior modification to a population used to breaking the rules, you might be forgiven if the barriers become overwhelming.

Says White: "It takes devoted individuals with a lot of strength."

At the same time, HAAP gives hope to participants by creating a sense of community among those who might otherwise be isolated. And it stirs a spirit of self-worth that in many cases has been dormant for a very long time.

Just look at White. He has already lined up a post-release job as a case manager for HIV-positive prisoners transitioning back into the community.

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Queers behind bars

BY HOLLY PRUETT

As a boy growing up in a nice middle-class family in Salem, Charles White drove by the manicured lawns and picturesque duck pond of the Oregon State Penitentiary every day.

"Never in a million years did I think I would end up on this side of the wall!" says White, 39, with a flick of the wrist and arch of a well-plucked eyebrow that shows he's not afraid to be gay in prison. "We're taken care of in here. We're the closest thing they've got to having a girl around."

White is joined by his "sister" Charles Johnson. They are friends from the streets, co-workers at the HIV/AIDS Awareness Program, and live in adjacent cells.

They estimate there are about 20 out gay men at OSP—just enough for their own softball team, the Stray Cats.

"When we're playing, honey, the bleachers are packed. Everyone wants to see a bunch of queens playing ball," White says.

What about the stereotype of prison as the worst possible place for a gay man?

Sure, there's homophobia inside, just as there is on the streets. But at OSP, with its high population of lifers and "old-style convicts," there's a prevailing code of honor, explains White.

Gary Haugen, a heterosexual lifer, stops by the HAAP office. He has spent half of his 36 years behind bars, and recently tried to donate part of his liver to his ailing sister. The HAAP staff organized a letter-writing campaign and used the opportunity to educate inmates about hepatitis C.

"These guys helped enormously," Haugen says, though his quest ended when his blood type failed to match.

"They get respect because they give it," he says, adding that, while White and Johnson are "out and loud about it," they are "able to communicate with all facets" of the prison's population.

Even a guard confirms that the duo are highly respected. It wasn't always this way.

Johnson recalls the standard practice in earlier years of single-celling prisoners thought to be gay. If you were "red tagged," you would have to use separate shower and bathroom facilities and would have a tough time getting a decent job.

He attributes the change, in part, to a protest by gay inmates at another correctional facility in the late 1980s. (State officials in the departments of Corrections and Justice could not confirm this report.)

But tolerance still seems scarce at other facilities. Johnson, who had never been east of Mount Hood, was transferred briefly to the Snake River prison.

"My hair was all whipped up"—he uses toilet paper rolls to set it—"and girl, they sent me back! There are queens who were in drag on the street that wear big old butch mustaches out there."

Even at OSP, a gay inmate who stood up for the rights of the gay community several years ago says he "got set up." Billy Kennedy, HAAP coordinator at the time, used outside contacts to call attention to discriminatory practices.



At one peer education session attended during research for this article, *Just Out's* reporter encountered an inmate with long, styled hair and feminine features. Although she was unavailable to comment personally, others say Jeri lived as a woman on the streets. A prison hairdresser, she was the subject of a *Statesman Journal* article several years ago that dubbed her "the only woman in OSP."

Immediately afterwards, he says, contraband was found in his cell. He lost his job and was placed in solitary confinement.

What about transsexual inmates?

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If inmates fear for their own safety, they can request housing in Administrative Segregation. Johnson knows of one transsexual woman who did so because "she thought everyone would rape her up here."

Johnson also recalls Linda, a preoperative transsexual woman with large breast implants who was first assigned to the Oregon Women's Correctional Center but then transferred to OSP. Johnson says despite discriminatory treatment by prison staff, Linda, like Jeri, was "well accepted" by the general inmate population.

Catherine Knox, an administrator with the Oregon Department of Corrections, regrets that there weren't "more enlightened options" for housing Linda.

Knox maintains that each transsexual prisoner is approached individually. Surgical status is not the sole criteria for assignment in the men's or women's prison, she says.

"We look at their psychological condition, how they've been treated by other institutions," she says.

Once housing is settled, sex-reassignment therapy is considered elective. Hormones are made available if the inmate can pay for them. Like the Oregon Health Plan, DOC classifies sex-reassignment therapies as "preferable and beneficial to some but not medically necessary."

According to OSP's Rita Chase, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is illegal; still, it happens.

"If you're gay and weak, people will prey on you," says Kennedy. "But if you stand up for yourself, they won't."

Even greater power comes from inmates standing up for each other.

White introduces Andrew Boyer, a gay man with AIDS who is incarcerated for exposing two minors to the disease. When Boyer first arrived, his photo was posted in the chow line and he took heat from both staff and inmates.

Soon others—who abhorred the crime but had compassion for the man—began to come to his defense.

"It makes us look bad to defend him but we can't see him harmed," White says. "We told people on the yard to back off. He's already got a death sentence."

Just Out also attempted to interview members of LesBi-Honest, an inmate-initiated group at the Columbia River Correctional Institution. CRCI counselor Lee Shaw describes the group as "very active in the community" and "successful in meeting homophobia head on, both inside and outside the facility." Access was not granted prior to this issue's deadline.)