

The gay and bisexual men's community and Cascade AIDS Project have been intertwined, it seems, forever.

Sixteen years ago, when men who love men—or simply have sex with them—were getting sick and dying in droves, the nonprofit agency sprang into being, born of a desire to assist them.

For the past several years, queer guys of all ages have turned to CAP for HIV counseling and testing. It was a place they felt comfortable. They could talk openly about their sexual practices—what they did with or to other men, what risks they may have taken. They could clasp a boyfriend's hand or kiss a male friend without encountering the shock and disdain of the surprised and judgmental.

"When I walked through those doors to get tested, I knew I was home," says Ron Dickinson, who went to CAP for testing in September 1998.

Prior to that, he'd been tested three times via the Multnomah County Health Department.

"You don't know who you're talking to or what they may think about your sexual preference or sexual behaviors," says Dickinson, referring to the public health establishment. "And you're sitting down with someone who is paid. They may be overworked or stressed out or a little tired of hearing the same things day in and day out."

CAP's program is fueled by volunteers who have committed weeks, months—sometimes years—to test and counsel those who seek out the organization. Those volunteers, mostly queer men, are trained and certified to be counselors.

"You knew they wanted to be there. It wasn't their full-time job—it was their contribution to the community," says Dickinson, who found his CAP experience to be so positive that he went on to become a volunteer counselor himself.

"I worked with clients from 17 to 70. They would tell me, 'We love that you are here. We love what you're doing,'" he says.

But Dickinson et al. won't be doing it much longer. CAP is shuttering its 5-year-old HIV counseling and testing program at the end of June for financial reasons.

"It's a new day at CAP," says Thomas Bruner, who became the organization's executive director a year ago. "The new day is here, and with it comes some new, hard, painful realities."

In a story that ran in *Just Out* in November, Bruner said he wanted to make CAP a "strong, efficient, effective and strategic organization," marking a "significant turning point for CAP, a cultural shift."

For years, the agency faced problems of financial mismanagement, and the board of directors, Bruner said, gave him "a mandate to beef-up the business infrastructure of the company."

And that's exactly what he says he's doing now. According to Bruner, the Washington County Health District, a primary funding source behind CAP's counseling and testing program, has decided not to fund the program for CAP's new fiscal year, which begins July 1.

SAY GOODBYE

Gay and bi men who rely on CAP for HIV counseling and testing will soon have to go elsewhere by Inga Sorensen

Bruner says from this point on "when a program's funding is reduced, the program will be reduced proportionately."

"It's unfortunate, but the agency can't continue operating the way it has in the past," he says. No more sprawling debt to pay off, no more scrambling patchwork. "We're not doing that anymore."

News of the cut, meanwhile, is prompting concerns about where—or if—gay and bi men will receive testing services.

"We test about 600 people a year," says Geoffrey Bateman, an amiable queer man who coordinates CAP's counseling and testing program,

profit agency? Or avoid testing altogether? The questions don't stop there: What about young queer guys? Or fears about testing through a governmental agency? Will the dialogue surrounding HIV names reporting come into play?

"It's hard to know," concedes Bateman. "It's very complex."

Bateman is also concerned about management's decision to slash CAP's popular Neighborhood MenTalk program, which has grown to 14 groups. MenTalk gives gay and bisexual guys a place to get together throughout the Portland metro area to talk and socialize, with the goal of building a sense of community. Bateman estimates 300 men have participated in the gather-

People seeking STD-related services and/or HIV counseling and testing share this same space, this same waiting room.

Carol Casciato is the charming and energetic county health services specialist for the STD program. She takes us on a tour of the clinic, which is located on the sixth floor of an office building in downtown Portland, not far from CAP.

She wants to convey the feeling created by the space and the staff; Casciato seems proud of both, and tells *Just Out* she believes the county is equipped to handle an influx of gay and bi men who may turn to it for HIV testing, which is available five days a week via walk-ins or by appointment.

Currently there are two counselors handling HIV testing. Both are women, though Casciato says there are openly gay men on staff available to do the testing if a client makes that request.

The county typically conducts its tests with needles, though Casciato says an oral test will be administered if asked for.

Casciato notes that some men already use both the county and CAP, while others will give the county a try for the first time. Still other men, she acknowledges, will seek out other alternatives, or none at all.

"I think CAP's program has been invaluable and I'm sorry to see it end," she says, adding, "My main concern is that some men may not feel comfortable testing elsewhere."

Over the years, county health officials have worked closely with CAP, and Casciato says the same holds true now. She's been meeting with Bateman and Rose to brainstorm ways the health department can support CAP during this transition period—as well as ways it can make its own services more comfortable for gay and bi men.

"We want to do what we can," she says.

David Christensen and Doug Moon agree. The two openly gay men are working with the county's new hepatitis A and B vaccination and community education program for gay and bi men.

The program, which the duo dub the "Gay Men's Health Project," kicks off July 1. It's designed to improve the sexual health of gay and bisexual men in Multnomah County by reducing the incidence and spread of hepatitis A and B.

In addition to testing and treatment services, the STD Clinic will also offer low-cost vaccinations for hepatitis A and B and risk-reduction education for queer men and other men who have sex with men.

Christensen was a driving force behind the creation of CAP's counseling and testing program, and for years he has worked with CAP and Multnomah County on HIV-related issues.

Both he and Moon express confidence in the county's commitment to reaching queer men, and they point to the fledgling Gay Men's Health Project as the latest example of that dedication.

"It's disappointing that CAP's program is ending," says Christensen, "but things change. It's inevitable, so it's important to come up with ways to address that change."



Cascade AIDS Project displays this arguably ironic billboard in downtown Portland

which features weekly Tuesday night testing sessions at the agency.

Like Dickinson, Bateman says many of the men who show up at CAP do so because they like the peer-based format; additionally, all the testing is done without needles. (A saliva test is used.)

"My sense from clients is that they come in and identify very strongly with the counselor. It can be very powerful when they know the counselor is gay; they may feel that person has been in the same situation, or had to make the same decisions, or had to go through a similar process to get to where they are today," says Bateman. "Talking with your peers can have such a great impact."

Despite that, he acknowledges that financial times could be better.

"Money for prevention is diminishing. AIDS fund raising across the country is down.... I know all of that," he says. "But I'm very concerned about what will happen to the people who would typically come here for testing."

Will they go to the county? Or to a private provider? Or to another community-based non-

profit agency? Or avoid testing altogether? The questions don't stop there: What about young queer guys? Or fears about testing through a governmental agency? Will the dialogue surrounding HIV names reporting come into play?

"It's unfortunate," he says, "but at least that program will keep going."

Alan Rose, manager of CAP's HIV prevention and education programs—and an architect of the testing program—says: "The [testing] program has been so successful. It's a great loss."

Rose has tendered his resignation effective July 15. He says that while the program cut is not the sole reason he's leaving, it is a significant one.

"It feels like a chapter has closed," Rose says, adding, "The question now is: Who will take the lead for HIV prevention among gay and bi men?"

The waiting room at the Multnomah County Health Department's STD Clinic has a warm feel. The deep maroon and blue chairs and walls create a relaxed atmosphere. Framed artworks dot the walls. The windows facing the elevators have been frosted to place clients with privacy concerns more at ease. The lighting is soft.