

COUNT ON THE COUNTY

Trying to fill the void left by the closure of CAP's HIV testing program, Multnomah County's STD clinic is off to a good start by Inga Sorensen

It's been eight months since Cascade AIDS Project shuttered its HIV counseling and testing program, a cherished service among gay and bi men, both as volunteers and as clients.

For many years, queer guys sought out CAP because, historically, the organization had been the place they felt most at ease getting tested.

Spawned from earlier gay activism, CAP was viewed not simply as gay-friendly but as an institution within Portland's gay and lesbian community. Indeed, the HIV counseling and testing program, established in 1994, was primarily fueled by gay volunteers who were trained and certified, committing months—sometimes years—to assisting clients.

In a *Just Out* article published last June, Geoffrey Bateman, a gay man and CAP employee who has since left the agency, said: "My sense from clients is that they come in and identify very strongly with the counselor. It can be very powerful when they know a person has been in the same situation. Or had to make the same decisions, or had to go through a similar process to get where they are today."

Bateman said CAP tested an estimated 600 people annually.

CAP's executive director, Thomas Bruner, told *Just Out* the program was discontinued for financial reasons.

In the same story, Alan Rose, who was then

manager of CAP's HIV prevention and education programs—and has also since left—said: "The testing program has been so successful. It's a great loss. It feels like a chapter is closed. The question now is: Who will take the lead for HIV prevention among gay and bi men?"

It's one of those wet-dry-wet-dry days in February. Jim Cox plops down in a chair in the office of Karen Lamica, manager of the Multnomah County Health Department Sexually Transmitted Disease Clinic and HIV Community Test Site in downtown Portland.

Lamica is an out lesbian, Cox an out gay man who shines with the light of life.

"The county has done a great job of selling me on the county," he bubbles.

A few months back, Cox was brought on as an HIV counselor with the health department. Before that—and for the better part of 14 years—his loyalty was with CAP. However, the testing program's closure and a staff in flux prompted Cox to turn to the county.

"It's been life-changing for me. The positive atmosphere here has made such a difference," he says, adding that his T-cell count has surged while his viral load has practically evaporated.

These reflections of the county clinic's queer appeal resonate marvelously with Lamica. After all, when CAP yanked its program, some critics expressed concerns that gay and bi men would



Multnomah County STD clinic staff (from left) Karen Lamica, an out lesbian and manager of the facility; openly gay office assistant Rick Holt; and Jim Cox, a gay HIV counselor

opt for no test rather than one from a government agency, due in part to homophobia.

"We wanted to allay those fears," says Lamica.

Almost immediately after CAP's program shut down, the health department launched an effort to promote the health of gay and bi guys. At last year's pride festival, for example, health officials immunized 130 people for hepatitis A and distributed literature on a wide array of sexual health issues.

Rather than focusing solely on HIV, the new program incorporates HIV issues into a broader framework of health issues: hepatitis A and B vaccinations, testing and treatment for a spectrum of sexually transmitted diseases, prevention education and community referrals. In other words, the department is trying to take a

more holistic approach to gay men's health and well-being.

"And I think it's important to have gay and lesbian people on your staff," says Lamica, adding that from January through June 1999—before the health department started its concentrated outreach—269 gay men came to the county for HIV counseling and testing.

From July through November—when the program was underway—the number climbed to 349. (The December figures were not available at press time, but Lamica estimates that the full-six month total would come closer to 420.)

"It's a good start," she notes approvingly.

■ For information about HIV testing and other MULTNOMAH COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT programs, call (503) 988-3700.

SUMMIT SCHOOL

Gay and lesbian educators and their allies will gather for the first Oregon GLSEN Summit on March 18 in Corvallis.

GLSEN stands for the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, a national organization with chapters throughout the country, including three in Oregon.

GLSEN brings together gay and straight teachers, parents, students and concerned citizens from all walks of life, in order to end the destructive effects of anti-gay bias in schools across the country.

For some time, a Portland-area chapter was the only one in existence in the state. During the past year, however, chapters have been established in the Ashland and Eugene areas (GLSEN Southern Oregon and GLSEN Emerald Valley, respectively).

According to Ron Bloodworth of GLSEN's Portland-area chapter, the Oregon summit is important for a variety of reasons. "This summit will mark the first real opportunity for us to

come together and network," he says, adding that folks will have the chance to identify similarities, differences and common goals in their respective chapters, as well as strategize on statewide issues.

One topic of discussion will be the Oregon Citizens Alliance's latest proposed ballot initiative, which, says Bloodworth, attacks "the heart of our work." The measure, dubbed the Student Protection Act, is aimed at the schools.

Says Bloodworth: "We must seize the opportunity of the OCA threat to educate the public about the issues in our schools."

Bob Morse of GLSEN Southern Oregon adds that critical issues like school safety will be addressed.

"We know that many [sexual minority] students feel unsafe or have been harassed in their schools," he says. "We have to keep working to combat this problem."

For more information about the summit, contact GLSEN Oregon by calling (503) 973-8489, or send an e-mail to GLSENOR@aol.com.

STILL SEARCHING

Though there had been some talk that the state's largest gay rights group, Basic Rights Oregon, would have a new executive director installed by March 1, it was not to be.

In fact, the search committee extended its deadline to Feb. 29 in order to encourage additional applications.

According to BRO's *Weekly Update*, the first wave of applicants netted three semifinalists. However, in order for the search committee to fulfill its commitment to the board, the search was briefly extended.

For the past few months, BRO has been working to fill the position left vacant by Jean Harris, who moved to California late last year.

Maura Roche of BRO tells *Just Out* it could now be another two to six weeks before a new executive director is in place.

■ Got a news tip? Let us hear it! Contact *Just Out* News Editor INGA SORESEN at (503) 236-1252, ext. 17, or inga@justout.com.

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