

As people with HIV and AIDS live longer, more active lives, many in the community are interested in returning to work.

But the context of a person's health can make that change difficult. To support this transition, Cascade AIDS Project has launched a new employment assistance program called Working Choices.

Funded by a grant from worksystems inc., it provides people living with HIV/AIDS the necessary tools to make the return to employment as positive as possible. Individuals have computer access and can receive assistance in assessing skills, writing résumés and job placement, whether in the open market or with one of the program's business partners. Staff also identify and promote specific kinds of work with employers that can be filled by people living with HIV/AIDS.

According to CAP executive director Thomas Bruner, the goal is to move more clients into the work force in order to generate income for themselves. "What we want to do is bridge this gap that has long existed between the HIV services sector and the employment services sector," he remarks.

An anonymous program participant voices concerns common to many when he says: "I knew I needed to start working again, partly because I was tired of being poor. But I also needed to get my mind working again. My health was pretty good, and I realized that staying home all the time was making me mentally stagnant and causing me to lose confidence in myself. It was also keeping me isolated socially. To deal with all this, I needed to work."

Bruner points out CAP defines work in a broad manner. For some people, it will mean a permanent, full-time job. Others, however, might be seeking work that is part time, season-

## BACK TO WORK

**Program equips people living with HIV and AIDS for return to employment** by Timothy Krause

al, temporary or even volunteer. Bruner also says individuals with HIV/AIDS are welcome to access this particular program without any obligation to participate in other CAP client services.

Coordinating the program are two new staff positions filled by Dough Zeh and Cicely Hambrick.

Zeh has been with CAP for 10 years and now serves as employment caseworker. He works one-on-one with individuals, offering career counseling, training and support in finding employment—all within the unique context of a person's HIV status and health situation.

Zeh helps clients identify and overcome barriers to employment, such as drug and alcohol problems, mental health issues and criminal history. He also assists individuals in the logistics of having to match workdays with good health days, arranging time off for medical appointments and knowing how and when to disclose HIV status.

Perhaps more importantly, however, he provides information about an individual's eligibility for continued benefits, such as the Oregon Health Plan and Social Security, as well as reasonable accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"It's all very low-key, and after our meeting we decide together what the next steps should be," says Zeh, who mentions that Working Choices also offers an intensive four-day employment training every other month that leads people

through each aspect of getting a job.

For employers, the program's free placement service saves time and money when conducting a search for new employees, says Hambrick, who joined the CAP staff last spring from Tri-Met's marketing department.

"Our program does an initial screening so that businesses can trust that we're sending out people who are work-ready and qualified for their positions," she explains. "It's an easy way for businesses to access a loyal and motivated work force."

Hambrick notes her office is connected with job developers from other social service agencies. If CAP's program doesn't have a qualified applicant, she can forward a job announcement to more than 60 other agencies free of cost.

Hambrick's role also includes providing employers with ongoing customer service that might encompass, for example, companywide HIV education.



Cicely Hambrick is recruiting employers to participate in the Working Choices program

"The employer really controls the amount of support they need," she says. "We can establish a very involved relationship, or it can be as simple as e-mailing a job opening once a month or once every six months."

Employers also may be eligible for significant financial benefits. Companies may save on business taxes by hiring from the target groups of either the Work Opportunity Tax Credit program or the Welfare-to-Work program.

Bruner is enthusiastic about the positive effect Working Choices will have on CAP. "I'm convinced it's an absolute turning point in the way the organization thinks and acts," he says. "It's such an exciting step forward toward an equip-

ping model of service delivery and away from an older, enabling model of service delivery. It can't help but have a ripple effect on all of our institution." □

For more information about WORKING CHOICES call 503-223-5907 or 800-777-2437 or visit the Internet site [www.cascadeaids.org](http://www.cascadeaids.org). Job seekers may e-mail Dough Zeh at [dzeh@cascadeaids.org](mailto:dzeh@cascadeaids.org). Employers may write Cicely Hambrick at [chambrick@cascadeaids.org](mailto:chambrick@cascadeaids.org).

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