

Paying it Forward

AIDS Service Center has expanded its reach by teaching the people it helps to help others in turn. **BY JENNIFER SCHIAVONE**

AIDS SERVICE CENTER NYC RECENTLY CELEBRATED TWO decades of bringing “positive change” to those living with HIV in NY. Executive director Sharon I. Duke has guided the organization since she came on board in 1991. What began as the Lower Manhattan AIDS Task Force (with three employees) has since grown to become AIDS Service Center NYC or ASC — encompassing four community centers spread throughout Manhattan (the main offices are located in Union Square, with additional centers in Washington Heights, the East Village and East Harlem). The program now has 100 full-time staff, 100 additional trained peer educators and an annual budget of nine million dollars. Each year ASC serves about 3,000 clients, while also educating an additional 14,000 New Yorkers about the importance of HIV testing, medical care and available support services.

ASC prides itself on its ability to coordinate individualized medical care for clients through its partnerships with leading hospitals, while also providing non-medical services like support groups, nutrition programs, advocacy services, housing placement assistance and care coordination. “We have the wrap-around support that really sustains people,” says Duke. “Without judgment but simply with the belief in the ability to change.”

“I say that when people come to AIDS Service Center, their experience of us happens in three phases,” says Duke. “They summon the courage to walk through our doors. They clean up, and they take charge of their health, their life and their choices. ... And [then] they help others who, like them, are beginning their path toward healing.”

Since its formation, ASC’s innovative peer education and training program has trained 37 cycles of peer educators. Each cycle, about 100 people living with HIV or at-risk individuals enter an intensive, two-month program that covers topics like HIV epidemiology, harm-reduction strategies and safer sex practices. Following graduation, these newly minted peer educators are then eligible for paid internships. Some become part of the prevention team, participating in educational outreach programs. Peer educators also escort clients to medical



appointments, sit with them in housing court or help fill out often complicated paperwork for entitlement services. Perhaps most powerfully, some peer educators help facilitate support groups and become role models to clients by sharing their own stories of change.

“They’re credible messengers of this information and they’re powerful role models,” says Duke. “To watch the transformation of people from when they walk in to who they become is magical.”

It’s a kind of magic that has had the power to significantly expand ASC’s reach. Last year, the number of hours contributed by peer educators who graduated from the program was equivalent to the work of 15 full-time employees — a savings of a half million dollars.

If you’re interested in helping, ASC’s meals program and food pantry always needs non-perishable goods. Its clothing room, called Wonderful Wearables, is always in search of an apparently elusive donation — gently-used men’s clothing — because, “Women clean out their closets much more frequently than men,” Duke explains.

Over ASC’s 20 years of service, Duke has seen the needs of the community change with advances in HIV treatment. It has led to a sense of complacency, but Duke’s outlook is still optimistic. “Our legacy of survival and determination and compassion is what really needs to guide us into our next decade of service,” she says. ■

VITAL STATS

3 of 4

Number of Americans living with HIV that do NOT have their infections under control

77%

Percent of those living with HIV who ARE in ongoing care and on antiretroviral treatment and have suppressed levels of the virus

96%

Reduction to the risk of spreading the virus when HIV-positive people consistently take antiretroviral therapy and practice safe behaviors

SOURCE:

Vital Signs report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention