AIDS in Seattle

POCAAN

Seattle-King County Department of Public Health (SKCDPH) was blinkered by the framing of the AIDS as a "gay disease" and thus focused their initial attentions towards the gay community. This resulted in less effective outreach to communities of color. As the HIV infection rate decreased in the white gay community, the rate increased among "non-gay, non-whites who are at risk."

In the spring of 1987, activists of color began meeting about how to prevent HIV/AIDS in their communities. In July they formed People of Color Against AIDS Network (POCAAN) – a group "organized by people of color, with people of color, and for people of color around the issue of AIDS. We believe that it is crucial that we empower ourselves and our communities to stand up in the face of this disease with dignity, integrity, and a true sense of self-determination."





New office & staff, POCAAN is meeting the challenge

by Shani Dirzhud-Rashid

SEATTLE — With a new office and five new staff members, *People of Color Against AIDS Network* (POCAAN), is preparing to meet the challenge of sensitizing the various AIDS service providers as well as the community, to the needs of people of color. A tall order, but for this young organization, not impossible. *SGN* talked to the new staff members to find out what their plan of action will be.

Larry Evans, a native of Los Angeles, has been in Seattle 20 years. He brings with him the experience of having worked at C.A.M.P. (Central Area Motivational Program), in the emergency services division. Evans said he gave clothing, food, and referrals, plus helped people with shelter needs. He felt he could use the skills gained there, to help in his new position at POCAAN as a Community-based Organizer and Outreach Worker.

"Basically, what I'll be doing is educating as many people as possible in the minority community, especially people in those high-risk groups," said Evans. Adding that staff members will overlap with various groups in the community, he said the connections for transmission were as diverse as suburbanites in Bellevue, to addicts in the CD in Seattle.

"People like to think that if they don't shoot up, don't have sex with Bi-sexual men or are not Gay, they don't need to think about AIDS. That's just not true. I want to educate people so they'll be aware," Evans said, adding that AIDS education could be added to the present agenda of food banks and other social service agencies.

Evans also stated that if needle exchange became a reality, POCAAN would be involved, even though there were some who opposed starting such a program.

"This is something I'd like to find out more about," he said, adding that his new position would be a learning experience for him as well. "We're all studying really hard now," he said.

Evan's work will take him into dangerous areas of the city, and he realized that each situation would mandate a different approach, adding to his enthusiasm at the prospect of solving these problems.

Donna Reed, who will also be working as a Community Organizer, will deal with the systems people of color must utilize.

"I'll be working with churches, health care systems, maybe fire and police departments, and other agencies where people of color go seeking help. I'll talk to people, let them know that people of color, and Lesbians and Gay men will be coming to ask for help," said Reed.

Reed will also be working to educate the clients of these agencies, to give them more information on what is available, and answer questions.

"I've been doing this since I was 17, working with issues that concern my people. I've been dealing with different aspects of organizing, or as an advocate. I'm particularly interested in organizing, because I believe it is possible to effect change in systems this way," said Reed.

Donna has worked in the Seattle Housing Projects, with Neighborhood Housing and Family Services. She worked at Yesler Terrance, Rainier Vista and Holly Park, three of the Garden Communities.

"One of the things I'm really interested in is going into the church. I was raised in the church, and I'm interested in getting the community to sensitize itself to a portion of our community that has gone unrecognized. It owes us," said Reed of the debt the church owes the Lesbian/Gay community of color. Reed looks forward to this opportunity.

Sheilah Robinson, who will also serve as a Community-based Education and Outreach Worker, said that she will focus on the IV drug user population, as well as partners of IV drug users. Robinson will also work with wimmin of color and street people. Robinson says plans are underway for safe-sex parties, and locations are being solicited.

"We were talking about going to the Crypt, where things we want to use are available. We have been discussing these issues with wimmin of color. We feel that if we're going to be talking about these things with street people, we need to be ready to give them something, some information, something they can use — bleach, condoms, etc.," said Robinson.

Robinson said POCAAN also wants to put together packets with dental dams, finger cots and latex gloves for the wimmin they will be working with. She went on to say that she and the other new staff members are reaching out to other organizations in the community for suggestions on what can be done, or what needs can be met by POCAAN, and advice to help the various parts of the community POCAAN will be serving in the coming year.

"We plan to interact with other agencies, like food banks. AIDS may not be the only problem callers have — they might be hungry, and we have to help them with that, too," said Robinson.

Donna Reed

Sheilah Robinson

Catlin Fullwood

Larry Evans

Judy Vega

Photos by Jim Lindquist

involved with several Latino organizations in the community," said Vega. She will be working with Donna Reed as a Community-based Educator and Outreach Worker, and will be helping to develop materials that relate to the Latino culture.

"That's exciting. There's not just one Latino culture — it will be interesting to work not just as an organization, but one-on-one," said Vega. She will also put on presentations relating to AIDS, aimed at parents and children, and will be working to sensitize health-care staffs to the particular needs of the Latino communities.

"I'll be talking to people in churches, taverns, beauty parlors, wherever they are, bringing them information so they don't have to go out of their way to get it," said Vega. She said she felt she would be learning from the people she met as much as giving them information. House parties are planned also, because, as Vega stated, not everyone feels comfortable talking in large groups of people. Vega said that POCAAN would work with the Latino AIDS Coalition as well, to distribute materials to the region.

Vega felt that people in the Latino community were getting more Homophobic, and felt this was from lack of knowledge. She pointed to the number of El Salvadorans who are in Seattle and living on the street.

"A lot of the men have never seen a condom. In some areas of El Salvador, they don't even have food — condoms just aren't a priority," said Vega. Problems with being illegal kept some from going to clinics where they could get AIDS information. Vega also felt talking to men about protecting themselves was challenging, and said she'd gotten over her embarrassment.

"I've already talked to several people, men mostly, and I think they're responding really well," Vega said, adding that she is glad POCAAN exists, and that its focus is on minority communities.

"I'm real excited to be going out in the street," said Vega.

Dorothy Weissman, the new Administrative Assistant, who is also the only member of the staff not of a minority group, feels privileged to be on board. "I must have had something they needed, and that makes me feel good," said Weissmann, a native of Britain. Weissman said that Britain had mailed out a franker and less Homophobic version of our Surgeon General's pamphlet, and that Britain and Europe had mobilized against the epidemic sooner than the U.S. Weissman said that she feels White people develop attitudes, and that when she runs into an attitude based on the color of a person's skin, she doesn't try to fight them. She feels education is needed in such cases.

"I'm hoping to be like a mother to them [the staff]. I'll be doing office management, so they can do their jobs. Also, I'll do a lot of telephone work, and help people who call in for information," Weissman said, calling attention to her feeling that Americans are more resistant to listening and talking about sex, and therefore are more resistant to information about AIDS.

"I think more is coming out, though, because of the drug issue. I think the resistance is decreasing now," said Weissman, adding that her perspective could be coming from the fact that she's working for an organization that's dealing with AIDS and related issues.

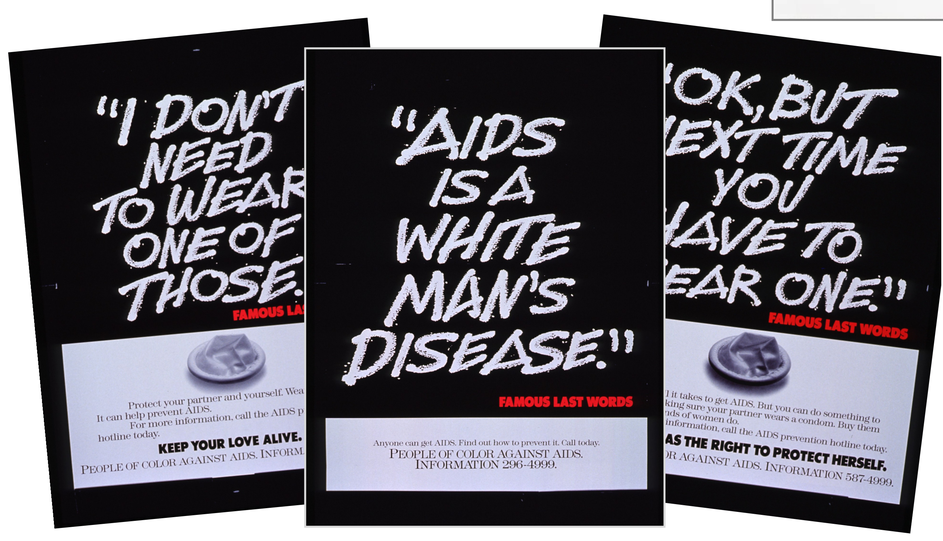
Weissman related an experience she had organizing a forum on AIDS for her church in Federal Way. She was, at first, worried that there would be negative response, and was pleased that positive response was what came, instead. Weissman, who has taught in Africa and England, said she has always been interested in biology and medicine. She said she felt the government needed to do more work with groups and to have groups join together to fight AIDS. She expressed her feelings about working with POCAAN. "It's exciting, every day the office gets more together to fight AIDS. We can't wait to get going," said Weissman. She said that people were already calling the office for information, and that she expected more calls to come in. ■

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SKCDPH partnered with POCAAN to provide outreach to communities of color. POCAAN then subcontracted with various organizations such as the Seattle Indian Health Board, Seattle Urban League, Washington Southeast Asian Alliance, Asian AIDS Council, and El Centro de la Raza to produce public health brochures and educational outreach tailored for each community.





POCAAN's first advertising campaign, was a "dark wake-up call" for those that did not understand the dangers of unprotected sex. "Famous Last Words" was plastered on billboards and ran on local TV stations. Other educational efforts targeted women and youth.



POCAAN continues today to serve "marginalized communities in Seattle and greater King County including Latino, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander and Native Americans." Its work has expanded from HIV/AIDS prevention to include "related issues such as substance abuse, incarceration, homelessness, sexually transmitted diseases, racism, sexism and homophobia also contribute to community marginalization and health disparities."