

BY EUAN BEAR

Burlington – While bidding farewell to now former director Kendall Farrell, the Vermont CARES Board of Directors has appointed Peter Jacobsen to replace her. Jacobsen was already working at CARES as the Director of Prevention Programs. Vermont's oldest AIDS service and prevention agency appointed Jacobsen after conducting a national search.

According to Jill Hoppenjans, board chairwoman, that search involved “advertising in [Washington] D.C. and all over the web,” and brought in “a pretty good, pretty diverse group” of candidates who were “not what we expected.” The board expected candidates with experience running an agency elsewhere who wanted to move to Vermont.

“What we got was people who had no idea of what it is like to live with HIV, no clue about funding streams, and no sense at all about delivering services in a rural area. They just didn't have adaptable experience,” Hoppenjans said.

Then the board looked within and realized what a treasure they already had in their director of prevention programs. Jacobsen is a Dartmouth graduate who played a major role in the founding of another Vermont nonprofit serving the LGBT communities: SafeSpace. He has worked in the past with the American Diabetes Association, the Burlington Community Land Trust and the Women's Rape Crisis Center.

Under Farrell's administration, there have been efforts to dissociate AIDS and HIV from their former identification with the gay community, to say, in effect, “HIV/AIDS is not a gay disease.”

Asked whether the promotion of a gay man to the helm signals a re-engagement with the gay community, Hoppenjans responded philosophically. “Vermont CARES has had its ups and downs with the gay community, just like in any relationship. It is a fact that most of our clients are men who have sex with men [MSM], but that's not the headline, and we always want to make sure people know that others are at risk. There's got to be a balance.”

“I don't think that was the intention of the board,” Peter Jacobsen said in response to the same question. “But I don't think that can *not* happen, given my connections to the queer community.” He added that about 60 percent of the agency's clients are MSM.

Jacobsen explained that his first



Peter Jacobson Named CARES Director

Agency Promotes from Within

priority is to make sure the agency is fully staffed. “Vermont CARES has two major vacancies right now, Prevention Director and Services Director. We have internal candidates,” he added, but their promotion would open other jobs in the agency. The funding for those positions is in place, he said.

The agency is “on track philosophically,” he said, “we're true to our mission. We will change how we do business to be more efficient. We're doing okay with our programs – those are really strong. There will be no shifts in programming until we find out about the Ryan White [Act] funding, and even then it won't affect people receiving services for 18 months.”

Hoppenjans, who has been on the CARES board since 2001 and was elected chairwoman in December 2004, said that with the new director, some things would shift, and others wouldn't.

“As far as working collaboratively with staff and other agencies in Vermont, and being on the cutting edge, taking leadership in the nation in turning down our funding, no, that won't change.

“How and where we get our funding will likely change. We have always focused on events rather than major donors, and it's just more efficient to focus on major donors. And Peter and our new development director, Matt Mulligan, have experience with that,” Hoppenjans concluded.

“Vermont CARES could do a better job educating the community generally,” said Jacobsen. “And CARES is well positioned to do that. We will use our name recognition and experience to combat the stigma and misunderstandings about HIV. We will also fight legislatively whenever the federal government threatens the anonymity of our clients. We will continue to work to get more funding for

other AIDS organizations.”

Noting the recent departure of Vermont Department of Health's HIV/AIDS Section Chief Kurt Kleier (a proponent of names reporting), Jacobsen suggested that any state requirement for reporting the names of HIV clients and patients would not be imposed “anytime soon,” in part because of CARES's decision to opt out of state-funneled CDC funding. The possibility of names reporting was just one of the “onerous” strings attached to the funding the agency refused to apply for.

Jacobsen asserted that Vermont CARES “is doing just fine” financially without the CDC funding, “which just affirms that our decision was the right one.” ▼