

WILB
QUARTO
HQ
75
.0971

VERMONT'S VOICE FOR THE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS

FREE

Volume XX, Number 10

NOVEMBER 2005

www.mountainpridemedia.org

Former AIDS Chief Tells All

Kleier Takes Health Department to Task

BY EUAN BEAR

CHICAGO – Kurt Kleier wants to set the record straight, so to speak.

For the record, Kurt Kleier was "asked to step down" at the end of an extended probationary period. He was *not* fired. "My probationary period was six months, but that was extended for two months by the department," Kleier said in a phone interview right at press deadline from his home in Chicago. When he left at the end of April, 2005, "Bill Apao and I sat down and agreed it just wasn't working for either of us."

Apao was Kleier's supervisor. In the interview, Kleier criticized Apao for a lack of vision, lack of involvement, and lack of interest in the AIDS unit. At a later point in the interview, however, he said he had frequent two-hour meetings with Apao.

Kleier also charged that his departure was the result of an orchestrated campaign by his own staff, who, he said, disagreed with some of his "strong policy stands," although their official case for opposing him was that they didn't like his "management style."

He said that when he arrived he was told directly that he had three tasks: "One, keep it off the commissioner's desk. Two, keep it off the deputy commissioner's desk. Three, keep it out of the newspapers."

Therefore, Kleier said, when the prevention grant-funding

process de-funded ACoRN, both the staff and his superiors were unhappy when legislators were drawn in and department deputy commissioner Sharon Moffett was involved in crafting a compromise to provide some funding to Mock's agency. "The staff didn't like this kind of backpedaling," Kleier said.

He also said that the staff was opposed to his support of "names-reporting" for people diagnosed with HIV. "What that does is allow us to do some excellent partner services work," Kleier said. "We interview the affected person and offer to contact the partners. We can then notify people who've been exposed. There are some 'tricks of the trade' we can use so that we don't reveal the sources. This has been tried and tested" in other states, notably Missouri, where Kleier had previously worked.

"The CDC [Centers for Disease Control] is pushing states toward names reporting for HIV, but they can't legislatively mandate it," Kleier opined. "But they will slowly but surely tie funding to names reporting."

"It's a good thing for Vermont to begin discussions, through community forums, discussion groups, whatever is the current vehicle," Kleier said, but that policy change was blocked by an "incorrigible, intractable" staff.

Moreover, he alleged, "staff were making funding decisions for organizations they were support-



Kurt Kleier, former head of the VDH AIDS unit (file photo)

ing. You could see their pictures on the websites. That's a problem in professional boundaries," Kleier said. "That's why you didn't see me out in the community when I was there."

Officials at the Vermont Department of Health declined comment on any of Kleier's charges. "Kurt Kleier was employed from August 23, 2004 to April 29, 2005. All personnel matters are confidential," said Robert Stierwalt of the department's Public Information Office. "No formal complaints have been brought to the attention of the VDH."

The other issue, Kleier said, was that any new director "lives in the shadow of Rod Copeland," his immediate predecessor. He charged that while Copeland did fully staff the program, he did not provide professional development training for that staff. He said Copeland had "made side-deals with Vermont CARES" that allowed the agency to use department funding for administrative costs.

Peter Jacobsen, current director of Vermont CARES, said, "There are no special deals. We go through the application process for grants the same as anyone does. We negotiate through the grants process and we and the Department of Health agree on a final grant."

Former CARES director Kendall Farrell declined comment when reached at home.

Rod Copeland did not return phone calls and messages left at his home and work phone numbers.

AIDS nonprofits "have airs that 'because we do good work we deserve the money,'" Kleier said. But these organizations, which he did not name, need to "demonstrate transparency, accountability, and outcomes. We know they're doing good work."

"There is such a disconnect between the Health Department and the community," Kleier said. "Some staff just don't have a good relationship with the community. It's really a reflection on the governor's office – there's no support there for

increased AIDS funding. It was very difficult to move forward."

Despite his short tenure and current criticisms, Kleier said he did accomplish a few things. Perhaps the most visible was moving the long-stalled outreach needle exchange program through to the commissioner, who approved it.

He worked with others to revamp the state's AIDS profile, a statistical picture of the disease and where it might be going. And, although he admits that others will disagree, he views it as an accomplishment that he began to establish "a climate of discipline and accountability" in the staff and for AIDS community nonprofits, a task he characterized as "like turning [an ocean liner] 180 degrees in 15 minutes."

Kleier concluded, "I have the best wishes for the department and want it to succeed. It's good for the community and the people with this disease to have an effective department. People in the Vermont [AIDS] community have a lot to share. ..."

"It's complicated. There was a whole lot of politicking and fine-lining" he was called upon to do without much guidance on such matters, he said. "And they wanted me to do this for \$43,000 a year. There needs to be a significant overhaul in the department or there will just be another director who will be there nine months. The commissioner is going to have to take an interest."

According to CARES Director Jacobsen, the Vermont Department of Health has had 10 AIDS unit directors in 10 years.

"The state Department of Health should be leaders, and it has not taken a leadership role on this disease," Kleier concluded.

Kurt Kleier is currently living in Chicago with a new partner and enjoying "a stress-free life" before taking on a new professional challenge. ▼

inside out:

this issue's contents

▼ Youth vs. Marriage?

p. 3 That's the way Outright Vt sees it on the national funding stage. Granters are shifting to "statewide policy" matters.

▼ Notes from NOLA p.8.

Walter Zeichner has been volunteering in the swamped Crescent City, blogging "hope, despair, huge-heartedness, fractured spirits."

▼ Gender Martyrs p.11.

Levi Terrance writes on the healing sense of community offered by Trans Day of Remembrance activities. If only VT would pass a law!

▼ Cathedral Secrets

p.19. E.A. Allen interviews Suzi Wizowaty about her new youth book, *Tour of Evil*, set in a French cathedral where orphans seek sanctuary.

▼ News 1-3, 6.

▼ Editorial 4

▼ Letters, At Witt's End 5

▼ Rest Of Our World 7

▼ Features 8-10

▼ Views 11-13

▼ Travel/Arts 14-18

▼ Compass19/Cal 20-21

▼ Source 22-3/Classics 24

▼ Gayty 25-27