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## FRIENDS VERMONT: Caring for the Body, Mind, and Spirit

Dan Wolfe (from materials and an interview by  
Walter Zeichner)

There is a new non-profit HIV/AIDS support organization forming in Vermont: *FRIENDS VERMONT*. Modeled on NYC's *Friends In Deed* by co-founders Fred MacGowan and Diana Scholl, the stated mission of the new organization is "to provide emotional, spiritual, and psychological support to all those affected by HIV and AIDS", including caregivers, families, and friends.

**Why another organization?** Both Fred and Diana feel the need for some emphasis on the spiritual needs of people affected by HIV/AIDS. The term *spiritual* they define to include both established Western and Eastern belief systems as well as meditation techniques and attention to the psychological aspects of wellness.

Fred, a native Vermonter and PWA, comes to this conclusion through his personal experience of participating in such organizations as *The Healing Circle* in New York. He envisions *FRIENDS VERMONT* as "a networking of friends with a focus on improving the quality of life on a day to day basis." Diana arrived at this shared viewpoint through her studies for a doctoral degree in ministry at the Episcopal Divinity School in Boston, where she worked especially in pastoral care, counseling, spirituality, and healing. The organization will, in her words, "give equal attention and nurturing to all sides of a person's life as they are dealing with this disease."

**Whom will FRIENDS VERMONT serve?** Everyone who has a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS, their friends, families, and caregivers. "It's really building a new community that's based in love

and compassion for each other," says Diana, to which Fred adds, "Being more loving human beings is the key: the twelve step and recovery groups are also models for us, as is *A Course in Miracles*. All of these can be very powerful ways for people to feel loved."

**What will FRIENDS VERMONT do?** Basically offer a confidential, safe home where weekly gatherings can take place. These meetings will build a support family for everyone who comes. This support can reach out when people are unable to come to meetings. Friends help one another come to terms with various aspects of dealing with a catastrophic illness. Since medical research indicates that support group participants live longer and in a better state of health than those who do not, a variety of workshops and fun activities will be offered in addition to the core series of weekly meetings.

*FRIENDS VERMONT* will also reach out to people in rural areas, involving them regularly to lessen the effects of their isolation. It will offer to schools, hospitals, and libraries up-to-date information stored on a series of computer disks about services, support, and health care collected from international databases. *FRIENDS VERMONT* will also provide referrals to alternative practitioners, as well as printed materials from the disks. Materials and services will be free of charge.

**Where will FRIENDS VERMONT meet?** Two core groups will begin to meet in the Rutland and Burlington areas by mid-October. Confidential locations and information on workshops

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