

VOICES FROM THE MOUNTAINS: What Is Really Happening with HIV Prevention for Vermont Youth?

Cleland E. Selby

MIDDLEBURY -- This is the year that Vermonters should begin hearing a lot more about HIV prevention. The Community Planning Group, which has received its support through the Vermont Department of Health, has created its prevention plan. But what in that plan will prevent the spread of HIV in our high risk youth population?

The answer is a rather simple one -- not much!

For whatever the reasons, the job of HIV prevention for school aged Vermonters has been assigned to the Department of Education. And with that goes the well known "local control" issue -- that local schools can determine a lot about what will and will not happen in their schools.

And we are all aware that one of the curriculum areas in which public schools are noted for doing almost nothing is human sexuality. HIV prevention cannot occur where discussions about human sexuality do not and cannot happen.

The State Department of Education has a quarter of a million dollar federal grant which comes from the Center for Disease Control. Nancy Emberley is the person at the Department responsible for coordinating that grant. "The Department is supposed to be meeting the needs of kids in schools, and we are trying to develop a more comprehensive program to do that."

Emberley readily admits that little can be done when local schools do not wish to participate. The Act Relating to Comprehensive Health Family Life Education does not require any commitment from schools to do anything. That law does not say where education will occur, what it will be, or who will be doing it.

"You should talk to Shawn Donaghue," Emberley said, "if you want to talk to someone who has a passion for this."

Donaghue began his work as a consultant with the Department last June. He is located in the St. Johnsbury office (phone (802)748-8640). He noted an irony about his past work in New Hampshire and his present work in Vermont. New Hampshire has no mandate for HIV prevention work in the schools; Vermont

does. Yet the students in both states are receiving about the same amount of information -- almost nothing.

Beginning this summer, teachers will have an opportunity to become trained in a program called "Be Proud, Be Responsible" that Shawn believes will work. The program is one which he has adapted from programs that have a research base. And they are programs that encourage open, honest discussions about human sexuality.

Both Nancy and Shawn are well aware of their high risk populations and the irony that it is the Department of Education that is being held responsible for their prevention education. This is the population of kids who do not attend school, who run away, who are addicted to drugs and alcohol, and who are rejected by their families.

"We have to reach them in alternative ways," says Donaghue.

Donaghue also pointed out another major problem. He believes that a vast majority of parents want quality human sexuality education for their children in public schools but are often too afraid to speak out because of the loud voices of the minority who oppose such discussions.

According to Emberley, her Department and the Health Department share equally the responsibility of working on HIV prevention for high risk youth. She also readily admits that the communication between the two Departments needs to be remedied. In the meanwhile only a few people like Shawn Donaghue are available to provide opportunities for Vermont youth to become involved in learning how to make better choices about their sexual practices.

Cleland E. Selby is Education Coordinator for Eckerd Family Youth Alternative, an independent school for abused adolescents.

All readers are encouraged to take their turn at the editorial bat and let their voices be heard on the topic of their choice. Send articles/columns to *Out In The Mountains*, P.O. Box 177, Burlington, VT 05402, or via the Internet at OutVermont@aol.com. ▼



Don't forget your rubbers.

You don't get it from toilet seats.
You don't get it from coffee cups. You
don't get it from desk tops in a school
room.

It doesn't fly through the air or
swim around in hot tubs.

You don't catch it from shaking

hands, kissing, sneezing, wrestling or
dancing.

According to the Surgeon General,
your best protection against AIDS,
barring abstinence, is use of a condom.

For the facts about AIDS, call the
Vermont AIDS Hotline.

VERMONT AIDS HOTLINE: 1-800-882-AIDS

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