



letters

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Out in the Mountains welcomes your letters. Although we will withhold names from printing upon request, the letter must be accompanied by a verifiable name and address in order to be considered for publication. We try to print every letter we receive, but reserve the right to edit for space and clarity. Letters are also subject to the editorial policy stated in the masthead.

OITM Missed the Boat

Editor:

Your lead article last month on changes in Health Department funding rules for AIDS service organizations was a great disappointment. (Health Department Changes ASO Funding Rules, July 1999) You have taken on the complicated and exciting challenge of creating a forum for all of Vermont's LGBT community. That article, however, might as well have been written for a Vermont CARES' in house newsletter. No other ASO was mentioned by name nor does it seem any others were even consulted. While Vermont is a small state and Vermont CARES may be its biggest ASO, it isn't its only one. The *Burlington Free Press*, the *Rutland Herald*, and even the Channel 3 news figured that out. You alone relied solely on information gathered from Burlington based Vermont CARES. Had you asked, you would have learned that the Brattleboro Area AIDS Project, for example, was not alarmed by the new rules nor the prospect of maintaining its duty of confidentiality in a slightly modified environment. Had you interviewed representatives from a wider coalition of service providers you would have discovered that not only was Tim Palmer's position on the new rules not uniformly held but you might have questioned why. I am left wondering if you may have missed some of the most significant aspects of the story without this question.

As a community paper, I believe your job is to provide meaningful investigative reporting about all the important issues affecting our community not to be a mouthpiece for any one organization. That's the kind of forum we need. Without the honest debate that good journalism can provoke, we all lose.

Diane Shamas
Putney, VT

Editor's note: Although I would dispute the degree of our failure, the bottom line is that you are correct: the article did indeed suffer from CARES-centrism. Our intentions were good: when this story broke late in production, we attempted, unsuccessfully, to contact both ACORN and BAAP. Unfortunately, the change of focus to CARES was

neither complete nor completely appropriate, proving that good intentions don't always pan out into good journalism. Your criticism is deserved. For more on the good, the bad, and the ugly in media coverage of this topic, see page 4.

The CARES Board of Directors Responds

Editor:

In recent weeks, Vermont CARES has been publicly accused of not being accountable or admitting a review of the public moneys it spends on client services and AIDS prevention programs. These charges are simply not true. Articles have appeared in various newspapers attempting to explain the conflict between Vermont CARES and the Department of Health. Unfortunately, these reports have been based on incomplete and misleading information, and have merely clouded the real issues involved.

The core issue is confidentiality. First, it has to do with the right of all of us to maintain a sphere of privacy around our lives that the government does not have the right to violate. Second, it has to do with the right of each of us to participate in public debate without fear of what the government might learn about our personal lives. Vermont CARES is committed to protecting the privacy of its HIV+ clients. For these reasons, in accordance with an agreement reached between the DOH and the Vermont PWA Coalition in December of last year, some HIV+ clients of Vermont CARES have denied the DOH access to their files.

Rather than working with Vermont CARES to satisfy their need for accountability in such a way that delivery of vital services to clients was maintained and clients' confidentiality not compromised, the DOH made a decision to cut Vermont CARES' state and federal funding by 50 percent. Furthermore, the DOH gave Vermont CARES less than a week's notice before these drastic reductions went into effect and subsequently refused to negotiate with the agency. These choices were made without regard to the undeniable harm they would bring to the HIV+ citizens of our state. (Bear in mind that CARES

serves 10 out of 14 counties in Vermont.)

In sharp contrast to the irresponsible decisions made by the DOH, the staff and volunteers of Vermont CARES have rallied together in order to continue providing primary services to people living with HIV. The entire staff has taken a 20 percent reduction in hours while volunteers have been marshaled to fill in gaps left by the cutbacks. Drastic cost-saving measures have been put into effect and the Board of Directors has conducted an emergency fundraising effort to cover the unexpected shortfall. One staff member even took a voluntary 60 percent pay cut. This response reflects a true commitment on the part of the agency to serving those living with and at risk of HIV.

Accountability is a commitment Vermont CARES has lived by and will continue to live by. The agency's accounts, correspondence and files, with exception of those restricted by client or personnel confidentiality, continue to be open and available to the public and the press. For the past four years, Vermont CARES has had an independent audit conducted of its financial records and its operations. Vermont CARES has consistently filed its reports with the DOH on time or in advance, and those reports have been thorough and detailed. Response from the DOH has not been timely, has not included responses to specific questions as to DOH policy, and, until very recently, has not resulted in face-to-face meetings as requested by Vermont CARES. We are hopeful that with the involvement of the Agency of Human Services, we will be able to resolve these long-standing problems cooperatively.

From the start, Vermont CARES has dealt with the Department of Health in good faith. Perhaps it is an inevitable aspect of the system that advocacy agencies like Vermont CARES will come into conflict with bureaucracies like the DOH. We hope that the future will bring a greater willingness on the part of the DOH to work cooperatively with Vermont CARES in order to serve and protect the HIV+ citizens of this state.

Jane A. Van Buren
Chair, Board of Directors
Vermont CARES

LOTS MORE LETTERS, P18

Corrections and clarifications

Once again, we must apologize to Scot Applegate. The photo of the vendor tent at Pride Day (pg 10, July 1999) was taken by Scot, not Max Stroud.

Also, we want to note that the list of Pride Rally speakers mentioned in the page 10 story was not, and was not intended to be, comprehensive.

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