

“Teaching other inmates about HIV/AIDS is not an easy task.”

—Dee Farmer, FCI, Springfield

BY JACKIE WALKER

Peer educators have often been the only source of education and advocacy in prison around HIV/AIDS issues. Three peer educators tell, in their own words, about their struggles and accomplishments:

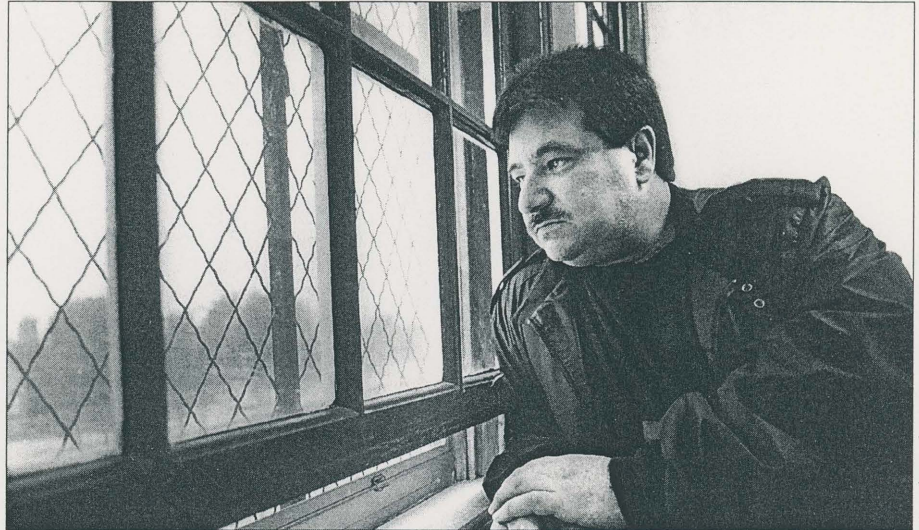
Dee Farmer-FCI Springfield, Missouri

There is little literature evaluating the effectiveness of HIV/AIDS peer educators. But many believe inmates are best qualified to educate other inmates about HIV/AIDS. Most prison officials are perceived as judgmental in their AIDS education programs. Instead many inmates, like myself, have filled in and sometimes taken over the prison AIDS education program.

Teaching other inmates about HIV/AIDS is not an easy task. In educating fellow inmates we are asking them to change the way they engage in sexual activity and drug use; or with the absence of condoms and clean needles, to abandon these activities completely. It is not easy to ask inmates to do this, because sexual activity and drug use can be a comfort in the lonely and isolated prison environment.

Our message has to be that though giving up these activities may be emotionally difficult now, not to do so can be a lot worse in the long run. Beyond AIDS education we must begin to network. I do my part by mailing AIDS literature to inmates throughout the country and writing articles for AIDS magazines and prison publications.

Here, at the Federal Prison Medical Center my mission is to show inmates how to live positively with AIDS. When HIV/AIDS inmates arrive here they are lonely and scared. On the terminally ill ward I witness AIDS patients being fed intravenously, unable to walk, barely breathing, and just hanging on to a thread of life. No matter how often I visit the ward I am always overwhelmed with a deep sense of sadness. I feel compelled to tell



David Spinks

Mike Flashner, a peer educator at the Pondville (MA) Correctional Center, would like to see a national peer education organization.

everyone that AIDS can be a killer. Protect and take care of yourself, because a prison hospital is one of the worst places to be.

Cruz Salgado-Walkkill Correctional Facility, New York

It hasn't been easy, trudging through this struggle, but after the death of a good friend five years ago, I decided to pick up the banner of peer support. You see, my friend died of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP). Since then, I've coordinated support groups, taught AIDS prevention education, conducted seminars, chaired the Prisoners for AIDS Counseling & Education group, and I am now a certified peer (AIDS) counselor. In the process, I've also seen how the AIDS crisis in prison has affected fellow prisoners. Although there has been some improvement, the overall quality of treatment for prisoners with HIV/AIDS continues to crawl at a snail's pace.

Hopes that things will improve in '93 seem bleak. Out of the quagmire three issues emerge that need action: 1) the slow process for release under the Medical Parole Law; 2) the need for discharge planning to include housing and support services for parolees; and 3) developing conduits for providing food and clothing to prisoners with HIV/AIDS. Anyone with insights is urged to contact the AIDS in Prison Project at (212) 254-5700.

In the meantime, I invite all prisoners to unite against AIDS and help calm the echoing scream of frustration, despair and fear of our fellow prisoners with AIDS.

Mike Flashner-Pondville Correctional Center, Massachusetts

The AIDS Education Awareness Program at NCCI Gardner wants to start a nationwide Peer AIDS Education Organization and encourages all peer AIDS educators to participate in forming a network for better medical care for HIV/AIDS and terminally ill prisoners.

The time is long overdue for peer educators to be heard nationwide. This organization would give every peer run education program a voice in Congress and the White House. The United States Supreme Court has ruled that prisoners have the right to adequate health care in prison. As peer educators, we know government action must be taken to meet these standards.

We all must take exception to statements from prison officials who say "they're going to pass away in prison anyway." We say 95% of HIV/AIDS-infected prisoners did not get sentenced to death and we must look at alternatives to see this doesn't become a common practice in our nation's prisons. ■

Jackie Walker is the Project's AIDS information coordinator.