Breaking Out

Landing on your own two feet after leaving prison

January 1, 2006 By Suzy Martin

One-fourth of American HIVers pass through correctional facilities each year, the American Journal of Public Health reports. Yet few organizations offer programs addressing their needs when they first hit the streets. In 2000, employees at Philadelphia FIGHT, one of the city's largest AIDS service organizations (ASOs), noticed that many ex-prisoners were ditching their HIV-education classes. So the group launched TEACH Outside, a course for the post incarcerated. "When people can't get the help they need, they may return to crime," says JohnBell, a positive ex-prisoner and course instructor. "And when you have HIV, that can kill." First, TEACH Outside offers the HIV basics." Most enrollees did not treat their HIV in prison because of stigma and don't trust the system," says co-instructor Laura McTighe. "They are often sick, have little understanding of the virus, are afraid they are going to die and have no support on the outside." Next, experts help students access Medicare, housing and job training and placement programs. Finally, the course pushes activism and self-advocacy. "It was enlightening," says TEACH Outside graduate Keith Bennett, 46. "It's hard to readjust to society and all the taboos."

If your area lacks a FIGHT-like service, don't rely on a caseworker—check around.Many ASOs have at least one employee with prison-specific knowledge. Also, ask your ASO to start a weekly prisoner support group, a nearly cost-free way to find encouragement, discuss your problems and get advice. Take care of your health first, says Bell—if you're sick, you can't hold down a job. Asking for help in prison is considered weak, so many won't acknowledge their needs on the outside. "If you just say 'I'm fine,' your doctor, case manager and we can't help you." Let freedom ring.

Prisoner Resources

For pointers inside or out, contact:

Black Coalition on AIDS
2800 Third St.
San Francisco, CA 94107
415.615.9945
www.bcoa.org

Correct HELP
8235 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 214
West Hollywood, CA 90046
323.822.3830
www.correct help.org

TEACH Outside
Philadelphia FIGHT
1233 Locust St., Fifth Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19107
215.985.4448
www.fight.org

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