



Home Work

Building access to a place you can afford

October 1, 2005 By Patrick Letellier

San Francisco HIVer Brian Basinger, 38, knew his Sustiva combo could induce some odd dreams, but nothing prepared him for a late-night house call from God. “You must organize housing for people with HIV,” the Almighty boomed in 2004. And so it came to pass that less than six weeks later, Basinger, a former marketing manager, and his positive partner, James Nykolay, 39, had put their disability checks toward starting AIDS Housing Alliance/San Francisco (AHA/SF). People lined up—and today he has helped hundreds find homes.

“Housing is the number one unmet need of San Francisco HIVers,” Basinger says. Stable housing promotes treatment adherence and good health and also reduces risky behavior, but medical bills, disability and job loss spark evictions and homelessness. San Francisco’s skyrocketing housing prices coupled with cuts in federal AIDS housing, have fomented a crisis. “Why would a landlord rent to us when they can rent to someone with a full-time job and good credit?” Basinger says. A condo conversion ousted him from his home of 14 years, forcing him to spend five months searching for someone who would accept a Section 8 housing voucher.

Basinger insists that for a little over \$4 million San Francisco could demolish its affordable-housing shortage. “The issue isn’t resources. We need a paradigm shift,” says Basinger. He believes traditional AIDS-housing providers should promote clients’ self-sufficiency rather than simply carve up the scant federal dollars from Housing Opportunities for People With AIDS (HOPWA). AHA/SF does it all, from helping with applications to teaching tenants’ rights and financial wellness. Patricia, 54, lived with her husband in a single-room-occupancy hotel without a kitchen or bathroom for years before discovering AHA/SF and her eligibility for a new studio apartment. “It’s paradise,” she says.

The housing squeeze has gone national. In New York City, 3,600 people with AIDS land in emergency housing every night—often filthy, run-down hotels unsuitable for people with chronic illness. Due to lack of housing, many remain in the emergency spaces for years, says Jennifer Flynn, director of the New York City AIDS Housing Network (NYCAHN). The crisis also extends beyond high-rent capitals. Nancy Bernstine, executive director of the National AIDS Housing Coalition, says many cities have just run out of affordable rooms, canceling their HOPWA waiting lists entirely. In 2003, 80% of the people requesting HOPWA assistance in Connecticut were denied, and Colorado has closed HOPWA waiting lists statewide.

Advocates are making progress. Thanks to a law that NYCAHN helped pass, since August, every positive homeless person in New York City must be referred to permanent housing within 90 days of entering the housing system. In 2004, AHA/SF and Basinger created and helped pass legislation prohibiting San Francisco landlords who evict HIVers from quickly converting properties into condos. And he plans to keep renovating the affordable-housing system, one brick at a time. "I hope people will implement our model in their hometown," he says.

Housing Resources

For help finding a home, check out:

AIDS Housing Alliance

415.552.3242 www.ahasf.org

National AIDS Housing Coalition

202.347.0333

www.nationalaidshousing.org

New York City AIDS Housing Network

877.615.2217 www.nycahn.org

U.S. Office of HIV/AIDS Housing

202.708.1112

www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/aids_housing/local/index.cfm

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