Inside Job

Why an ex-con is pushing condoms on Arnold's House

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47
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Diagnosed 1996

In 1997, I embezzled $30,000 from the bookstore I managed after my new boss said he was going to fire me because he "didn't want faggots running his store." I was sentenced to three years in a restitution center—which is like a halfway house. But when I disclosed my status to a prison health worker, I was told the center didn't allow people with HIV. I ended up in an HIV block at Chino State Prison. The entire facility banned condoms because sex is technically illegal and condoms are considered a weapon, so some guys used plastic wrap from their sandwiches. My positive cellmate and I became lovers and shared a bed but didn't have access to condoms. And as long as the guards saw two heads in the cell, they never said anything.

Two days after my parole in 1999, I showed up to volunteer at Correct HELP—an organization that helps incarcerated and post-incarcerated HIVers. Currently, we're lobbying California's House of Representatives to pass a bill to make it the nation's first state to allow condoms in all prisons—it will likely be voted on in June. In jail, I wrote to legal organizations about HIV segregation and not being allowed in the restitution center. Correct HELP's founder, Mary Sylla, took my case, and eventually, with the help of other prisoner's rights lawyers, we got rid of Chino's HIV-only unit.

In prison, I was discriminated against for being gay and positive, and after my release, no one would hire me because of my criminal record. Also, my parole specified that I couldn't have a job handling money, which was all I'd ever done. But after four months, Correct HELP hired me full time, and now I can finally be myself.

When I'm trying to get funding for new programs or support for the bill, being HIV positive, gay and post-incarcerated actually helps—people believe I know what I'm talking about. It also gets prisoners to listen when I do harm-reduction education in L.A.County prison—which lets me hand out condoms. Because nonprofits will fund condoms in the state's prisons, taxpayers won't have to pay anything. Why hasn't this happened already?

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