Matchmaker

NCAP’s Paula Van Ness helps pay the piper

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Check this out: The National Community AIDS Partnership (NCAP) gets its money from the Ford Foundation and boasts the support of AIDS activist Mary Fisher, the HIV positive woman who spoke at the 1992 Republican national convention. With this legit duo, AIDS doesn’t get much more sophisticated.

So what is NCAP? According to its presidet, Paula Van Ness, it’s an organization that endows community groups working for AIDS. “The Ford Foundation recognized that there wasn’t one epidemic, but many,” says Van Ness. And it also realized the only way to help specific communities deal with AIDS was to let the local groups determine their own needs.

Since 1988, the Ford Foundation has provided $11 million to NCAP which in turn gives grants to local groups that are then charged with locating matching local funds. NCAP also gives special grants to cover administrative costs. All the money that is raised locally directly benefits the community. “There is no second guessing,” assures Van Ness. “Grants must follow local priorities.”

Van Ness offers as an example the regional HIV/AIDS Consortium, a group of 11 counties around Charlotte, North Carolina, a state deep in the Bible Belt that, until recently, had no matching funds for AIDS services. NCAP provides care, but also aims to influence public policy. “We have our best friends and our worst enemies within communities of faith in this country,” says Van Ness. “So we must figure out ways for our friends in those communities to be more effective and to taek some of the steam out of those who are actively engaged in discrimination and making moral judgments and impeding our progress.”

The Consortium, says Van Ness, “found a way to educate the clergy and to bring in the AIDS National Interfaith Network to help them figure out what to do next.”

Van Ness, 42, began her professional life in reproductive health as a public health administrator and in 1985 became the CEO of AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA). While coping with the enormity of the AIDS crisis, Van Ness isn’t completely overwhelmed by it. “I struggle to find a way to give my job as much as I can and to be a complete person. Sometimes I fail miserably,” she says.

“One of the things this epidemic has taught me about life is to live it to the fullest. Life is fragile for

all of us; it’s a precious gift. I am a single parent, and I did that by choice. I felt that I could go through this life without a relationship with a man, but not without a child. This job, early on, afforded me stability, and I went ahead and had this kid.” Her voice softens when discussing Emily, her 5-year-old daughter.

As an AIDS industry worker, though, Van Ness is worried about Washington. “I am concerned that the positive messages about AIDS sent out by the Clinton Administration have been misinterpreted by some people. They say ’The government has it under control.’” AIDS activists know better, but Van Ness hopes that Clinton will pay attention to AIDS. “It’s always easier when you have an enemy. As a national movement, we don’t know how to be in the in crowd. We were out for so long.”

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