Personal Transformations

January 1, 2001 By Kai Wright

A couple of years ago, Earline Budd was elbow-deep, plunging the latest Department of Corrections clog in her outreach work. The Washington, DC, jail had posted a notice barring the entry of visitors not dressed in attire corresponding with the gender listed on their ID, and for transgender folks like Budd had a problem with that. She sued, forcing the policy's repeal.

As I joined her today at the jail to check up on the change, Budd's reason for making such a fuss about her right to visit a place most people would love to be banned from became clear. A man came up to her, excitedly gesturing with a scrap of paper bearing her name and phone number. They'd met on the bus the night before, just after he was released from jail at 2 a.m. with no place to go. It's one of Budd's pet peeves -- the system dumping ex-offenders, particularly HIVers, onto the street instead of into a transitional program. The man wanted to make sure that she remembered him and promised he'd call.

Budd coordinates transgender outreach and client services for Safe Haven Outreach Ministries, which provides housing, drug treatment and mental health services for nearly 400 people in the DC area. Most clients come to Safe Haven via the corrections system, and most carry "dual diagnoses" of drug or mental health problems combined with an HIV infection. Safe Haven recruited Budd's expertise earlier this year. A DC native, she spent 12 years throughout the '80s and '90s in and out of prison on drug charges. Since her release and testing positive, Budd has become a tireless and well-known advocate for the city's trans community.

"This is a population that's rarely, if ever, acknowledged," she says. "For once we have a place where we know we're gonna get accepted. The help is here now." And not a minute too soon. A recent survey, which Budd helped conduct, found that almost a third of DC's male-to-female transgender population is positive -- the highest prevalence rate among the city's at-risk groups. And, most troubling, while 36 percent report having drug problems, only about half of those have ever sought rehab or drug treatment.

Budd and her cadre of seven transgender outreach workers will work the prisons and streets trying to bring in the other half. That means not only more battles with corrections officials -- Budd recently discovered officers disclosing inmates' HIV status -- but also with local homeless shelters. She recently received several complaints from transgender folks who have been turned away from one of the city's largest shelters because they were dressed "that way." She's notified her Gender PAC lawyer, and they're investigating whether the shelter receives government funding. If so, it's back to court for Budd and the DC government.

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