Taking Care of Their Own

The Actors' Fund hands over real cash for real bills

October 1, 1995 By Ann Northrop

In 1882, members of the theater community were about on a social par with prostitutes, and John Wilkes Booth hadn't helped their image either. So actors and their colleagues figured they had better take care of each other, because no one else was going to do it for them. They created the Actors' Fund "to provide for the social welfare of all entertainment professionals." They raised money among themselves and gave it to those in need.

One hundred years later, they got hit with AIDS. While the epidemic has been a major trauma, the theater community at least had some experience with organizing help for its own. Thus it has been able, gradually, to integrate extensive AIDS care into its ongoing mission.

The Actors' Fund started seeing clients with AIDS in 1982. In 1988, it set up a full-fledged AIDS Initiative, whose caseload doubled twice in the first year. For 1995, the Initiative has a budget of $2.7 million.

Just as not all BC/EFA money goes to the Actors' Fund, so the Fund does not get all its money from BC/EFA. The half-million dollars of its 1995 budget not covered by BC/EFA is expected to come from LIFEbeat (the music industry's AIDS fundraising arm), from The Shubert Organization and others.

Some of that money goes to hire social workers and other staff to provide counseling, help people get insurance or government benefits and run support groups. But most of the money from the AIDS Initiative goes directly to the clients in the form of cash grants. Forty percent of that cash covers rent payments; another 23 percent buys health insurance. The rest goes for living expenses, funerals, psychotherapy, phone bills, alternative (read: "unreimbursed") therapies, doctors, utilities, car insurance, dental care, lab fees, etc., etc., etc. The Fund is universally praised for its willingness to hand over real cash for real bills.

It is also praised for the quality of its social workers and the excellence of its support groups. Its only major problem is its limited outreach: Many people still think the Actors' Fund serves only actors. Of 315 clients served by the AIDS Initiative in the first sex months of 1995, only one was a member of the Directors' Guild, one an usher, one a writer, one a wardrobe union member. The Fund stands ready to help dancers, grips, stage managers, film editors, stagehands, et al.; eligibility includes "All professionals in film, television, cable, radio, theatre, dance and music."

Eighty-five percent of the AIDS Initiative clients live in New York and California, with the rest scattered over another 21 states. Eighty-five percent are between the ages of 30 and 50; 98 percent are male; at least 20 percent are African-American, Latino or Asian; 55 percent have made less than $5,000 a year in the theater over the last three years.

AIDS Initiative clients received 66 percent of the direct cash grants given by the Actors' Fund. Forty-four percent of the Fund's social work staff works exclusively with AIDS Initiative clients. The caseload is still growing.

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