Editor’s Letter

Living Conditions

November 1, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

Not a week goes by at *POZ* that I don’t get a handful of letters from HIV-positive readers who are in jail or prison. The first time I got one, I wondered: What would a man in Sing Sing want from me? Turns out, he wanted advice—about treatment for HIV and nutrition—two things he was hard-pressed to get on the inside.

I’ve been reading prisoner mail regularly for almost three years now. Thanks to those of you who share your lives with us, we at *POZ* get a glimpse of the challenges you face. We hear that you’re not getting access to medical care or HIV meds, that HIV stigma leads to you being beaten or being placed in solitary, and that a lack of clean food and water prevents you from adhering to treatment regimens and withstanding your medications’ side effects. And we hear that when you get out of prison, you struggle to reestablish your life and your HIV care—and you do this with the double stigma of being HIV positive and being branded a criminal.

Two things consistently surprise me about the letters: the beautiful way they are written (with dignity, deference and respect) and what they reveal. The majority of you who write to us have been locked up for minor crimes you committed in order to survive or eke out better living conditions for yourselves and your families.

Everything is connected. Without adequate education, food, clothing and housing, people must resort to extreme measures just to survive. Given our exceedingly litigious country (the United States incarcerates more people than any other nation), too many people end up in jail. I am not saying we don’t need prisons. Some people present a clear danger to society, and some crimes do warrant high security detention and serious punishment. But these are the exceptions. The majority of people who send us letters spend six months to a couple of years in jail for petty crimes for which they often are paroled.

Even a short stint in jail or prison can derail someone’s life. What happens to that person’s family and relationships while he or she is locked up? What happens to the health of those who enter prison with HIV, or, as is more frequently the case, those who find out they have HIV while in prison and don’t get treated? Prison can disconnect people from care and support services that are crucial to keep them alive and well; and it’s difficult to reconnect with that care and support after release.

And let’s finally get our heads around the notion of distributing condoms in prison. Condoms do not make people have sex; condoms allow people to have the sex they’re going to have no matter what—safely. HIV rates prove that sex is happening in prison, and frankly, it’s criminal to keep people from the tools they need to protect themselves. If our government insists on putting so many people behind bars, it has the responsibility to afford those people basic human rights, including the right to keep themselves alive by practicing safer sex and accessing proper health care.

I want to extend a special thanks to all of you who are incarcerated and write to us about your HIV challenges (we highlight some of your stories in our feature, “Free at Last?"). Rest assured that your words reach us, and we share them with those focused on improving your access to information, care, treatment and condoms. Our goal is to empower you with information so that when you join us again on the other side, you do so in good health—and in good spirits.

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