Merrimack Valley Assistance Program Works to Fight HIV

The New Hampshire group MVAP offers an array of services to clients living with or affected by the virus.

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What began over 25 years ago as a group of volunteers fighting the AIDS epidemic has evolved into an organization that empowers and provides aid to a community of people living with HIV.

The Merrimack Valley Assistance Program (MVAP) works to serve people living with HIV in New Hampshire by offering all kinds of services—including housing, food, medical care, education and more—to "honor the inherent dignity and strength of people living with HIV/AIDS."

Daniel Amato, the director of office operations, says the program aims to help anyone in.

"We try to be inclusive and progressive and welcoming all aspects of life," says Amato. "And that's because our population that we deal with is diverse. And so we tried to be inclusive and welcome to all ethnicities and nationalities and languages, sexual orientations and genders."

"We are really a connection to care and retention into care," says Amato. "We really strive to keep clients engaged with their medical providers, like through our case management and reducing the barriers that they may be experiencing to kind of offset those incidences where they might not be getting those HIV services through their infectious disease provider."

MVAP knocks down those barriers by offering access to medical care, such as transportation, housing with an official address or even just a cell phone.

"Our slogan is 'Educate, support and empower,'" Amato said. "We're still here to support everyone today and educate them on what it means to be living with HIV and how to get support and assist people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS."

Clients who receive support from MVAP are also enrolled in the NH Care Program, which implements the Ryan White CARE Act. As a child, Ryan White was refused admission to his public school because of his AIDS diagnosis and became a nationally known activist before passing not long before his high school graduation. The act named after him funds the largest federally funded program in the United States, which covers HIV and AIDS treatment for people with limited resources.

Amato says MVAP staffers have a personal interest in helping members of the HIV community and support them outside of the organization by attending events of interest to them, such as the Pride festival known as Queen City Pride, which was held in Manchester.

“All of our case managers, and even our board of directors, we all have an interest in the agency of itself, and some of that stems from knowing people that have HIV, being people that are living with HIV, and even you know before our robust medications, knowing people that actually died of AIDS,” says Amato.

One of the most important aspects of the agency, Amato says, is making people feel comfortable enough to get support in whatever way they need it by “empowering them to be able to make their own decisions…[and] guiding them in a way that we promote education and prevention and viral suppression and just try to increase the services in our community.”

“[I]t’s in our vision to really play a role in affecting local, state and national policies on civil rights, discrimination, HIV and AIDS prevention, education and research and then, obviously, directed care for our clients,” notes Amato. “So many of us have other commitments as far as being on boards and really [try to] communicate what we’re seeing in the community and on behalf of our clients…up to the people that can that have the power to make those changes.”

Although MVAP is not currently seeking volunteers, donations are always welcome and can be made via PayPal or the donation page on MVAP’s website. Amato says all donations “go directly to client care.”

Interested in becoming a client? Complete this form to find out how MVAP can help you.

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