Broadway Cares' Tom Viola: GMHC Officials Lied

May 25, 2010 By Sean Strub

For the past several weeks, iconic activist Larry Kramer and Marcelo Maia, a member of the board of directors of New York's Gay Men's Health Crisis, along with GMHC clients and other activists, have led an effort to demand greater transparency and accountability from GMHC.

The agency's announced intent to move from New York's Chelsea neighborhood to a much less-convenient location, while also cutting popular services, prompted what is now a rapidly-escalating confrontation. The story has been covered by the Advocate as well as the Wall Street Journal.

A few days ago, in a stunningly courageous email to Larry (reprinted in its entirety below), Broadway Cares' longtime executive director, Tom Viola, has publicly accused GMHC officials of lying. Tom also details a horrific story of what constitutes "process" these days at GMHC and asserts that GMHC has been *"disingenuous to their friends and colleagues to say nothing of outrageously dishonest to their clients"*.

AIDS service providers across the country have become expert at marginalizing empowered community voices demanding accountability. Larry's angry voice is, sadly, dismissed by some as an echo from another era.

However, dismissing Tom Viola, who is as calm, easygoing and analytical as Larry is passionate, curmudgeonly and instinctive, is not going to be so easy. Larry has often and necessarily been a polarizing figure; Tom is one of the most well-liked and well-respected AIDS leaders in the country.

Tom's email to Larry explained why he personally could not pursue the specific issue at hand any further. In doing so, he tells truths that ought give every member of GMHC's board, as well as their funders, serious pause.

I cannot help but believe that if there was more independent HIV+ representation on GMHC's board, and a more substantive commitment to the Denver Principles, GMHC would not be in the tragic and sad place they are right now.

GMHC once represented the very best of our community, reflecting values of inclusion and empowerment that were modeled around the country and around the world. That is no longer the case.

I'll let Tom's heartfelt email--which I am sure must have been painful for him to send--speak for itself:

From: Tom Viola

To: Larry Kramer
Sent: Wed, May 19, 2010 11:43 pm
Subject: Last ditch efforts. GMHC makes it decision.

Larry: I will not harass the new landlord. In this specific case, that is something I just cannot do. But I don't want to sit here in silence and not tell you why I won't.

Marjorie (Hill, GMHC's executive director,) and the GMHC Board have made its bed. The chips will now fall where they may. Perhaps things will work out better than we hope or maybe not as bad as we fear.

I was always willing to say, let's see what can be done with what is. But let's have an open discussion. This has been an incredibly difficult situation. But for better or worse, this was their decision to make and I have to respect that, as both a fellow executive director and member of other Boards.

But they have also quite sadly in the process shown themselves to be disingenuous to their friends and colleagues to say nothing of outrageously dishonest to their clients. I am shocked that they would not have the courage or integrity to tell us all that they always intended to sign that lease.

We can disagree, argue other options, ask for further and open discussion. BUT TELL US THE TRUTH. I sat there at last week's CAB meeting and above the shouting asked Matt (Moore, GMHC's Board Chair) and Marjorie directly: "Just tell us, do you intend to sign the lease or are you willing to postpone signing to explore other options with help."

Tell us the truth - yes or no - and we will all then make decisions about how to move forward, go elsewhere, stay, participate in the process or not. And they sat there, looked back at me and would not say yes or no to either question, instead throwing numbers and disputed facts to avoid a simple answer, hoping I now believe that further confusion would lend them cover.

I left the room having no idea what they intended to do and no feeling that they cared that I did not. They knew the answer then and lied. If I felt any need to be polite, I might say "chose not to respond". But I'll stick with "lied". To my face. To all our faces.

What I learned about GMHC these last couple weeks is sad and incredibly disturbing. It will be a long time and take much personal and professional explanation before I ever recommend that BC/EFA fund them again.

I don't kid myself, the annual $25,000 or so offers no real leverage to affect or change decisions - and perhaps shouldn't. But in this process we have been treated with dismissive disrespect.

It is a sad reflection on the organization's culture at the top. It bodes poorly for their future.

And, if I may quote my Italian grandmother: "The fish stinks from the head."

But in all seriousness - like most scandals, it is never what was done, it is how those caught up in what was done behave once questioned. The leaders of GMHC have been dishonest, intellectually slippery and evasive.

This is not how you treat friends. I am done with them and have no intention of wasting my time at that

Board meeting tomorrow. I'm sorry, Marcelo. One executive director does not go to another executive director's Board meeting to shout. You hope that mutual respect brings honest discussion. It seems to have not.

Sometimes disrespect must be met with anger. Other times with silence and a willingness to move on to where one feels engaged and respected. There are always choices and options. As there are consequences.

BC/EFA's hard earned money can be added to grants sent to Harlem United, God's Love We Deliver, Housing Works and Callen-Lorde. BC/EFA is not and I am not abandoning people with AIDS. But I am now tired of being treated shabbily be some who have been charged to provide people with AIDS with services. Perhaps the services are best delivered elsewhere.

I am now not willing to risk my personal or professional reputation harassing anyone to put GMHC in a position to be forced to review or reconsider its decision. They don't want to. In truth, they don't have to. They just don't have the guts to tell us that.

Leaders should have the courage of their convictions. These are mine.

I love you Larry. We tried as we both know how, with rage and reason, to bring some light and discussion to this decision. It was flipped off. We'll now see how it goes.

To be fair, I have copied this to Marjorie and those I know on GMHC's senior management team. Feel free to share this with whomever you like.

Tom --

Tom Viola
Executive Director
Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/broadway-cares-tom-v