



From Slinging Lumber to Leading a Harm Reduction Center

Meet Christa Weather of Open Aid Alliance in Montana.

June 21, 2019 By [AIDS United](#)

The following post is from Christa Weathers, executive director of the [Open Aid Alliance](#), a harm reduction organization in Missoula, Montana.

I found my way to this work in the most unlikely place. I was slaving away in 100-degree heat slinging lumber around while dressed in leather chaps, leather gloves and skin tight jeans. Sounds provocative, but I hated every minute of it.

It was the putrid smell of wet sawdust and whirl of saw blades that drove me to finish my college degree and leave the rural logging town I grew up in. I found escape in the petri dishes and polymerase chain reaction machines in the molecular biology labs on the campus of Washington State University. At first I wanted to study HIV as a scientist but each day I went to work in a laboratory I looked at the vials of blood and wondered about the story represented. It's the humanity that has kept me engaged in this work for the past 11 years.

It started with a volunteer stint doing HIV education in Malawi, Africa, and then my fledgling career change began to take shape during a VISTA service year. I was lucky to find employment as a Prevention Coordinator with Missoula AIDS Council in 2008 and so it all began. For the past 10 years I have served as the Executive Director of this organization now called Open Aid Alliance. There have been so many changes in the field and in the way we conduct business, but I am more energized about where we are going and the change we can accomplish, than I have ever been.

We provide a wide range of service for people experiencing stigma as they work toward better health outcomes. We provide housing for people living with HIV, a wide range of testing and prevention programs, a syringe service program, overdose prevention and response, peer support and a harm-reduction-based treatment center for people experiencing addictive behaviors.

Like many community-based HIV service organizations, we have gone through tremendous evolution to adapt to changing health care, biomedical interventions and funding streams. We've pushed forward through some tough times to become a resilient and innovative organization. Funding from AIDS United's Sector Transformation initiative was a catalyst for this process. Our project was the result of a long and arduous process of evaluating transformative possibilities. We engaged a wide range of community members and participants in the process.

Ultimately, AIDS United's support allowed us to become a certified chemical dependency treatment center in the state of Montana. We wanted to create a unique treatment program different from any other currently certified in the state. Our challenge to ourselves and the system was to maintain fidelity to our harm reduction model while gaining access to Medicaid and other fee-for-service billing options. This has been such a challenging and exciting project. It often felt like we were turning the systems inside out and shining lights in dark corners for avenues to accomplish our goals.

We're still a work in progress, but so many opportunities have emerged from this process. For those of you that might be considering a transformative project I encourage you to dive in with an open mind and be fearless in your transformation. I would imagine these projects are rarely described as easy or simple—let it be messy, and real and the payoff will be evident. Best of luck!

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