

prison health news

-better health care while you are in and when you get out-

Issue 8, Summer 2010

Who We Are...

We are on the outside, but many of us were inside before... and survived it. We are formerly incarcerated people and allies talking about health issues and trying to bring about a positive change for all people who are in prison now or ever have been in the past. This newsletter is about all of us.

We will be talking about health issues. For example, what is good nutrition? Where can you get services and information on the outside? We want to take your health questions seriously and break down complicated health information so that it is understandable.

We're also here to help you learn how to get better health care within your facility and how to get answers to your health questions. Don't get frustrated. Be persistent. In prison, it's often hard to get what you want, but with health information, it doesn't have to be impossible. Join us in our fight for our right to health care and health information.

Read on...

From,
Ben, Che, Cliff, Hannah,
James, Jeanette, Laura,
Loretta, LuQman, Najee,
Roy, Sara, Samuel, Suzy,
Teresa, and Waheedah



Study by Pete Yahnke

Justseeds 'Voices from Outside' portfolio, justseeds.org

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write an article!

We have gotten lots of requests for articles already, and we know that everyone who reads this newsletter will have questions or their own story to tell.

Every issue, we have five different feature sections:

1. Body, Mind & Soul –
on the concrete health information people in prison need access to in order to advocate for standard of care treatment

2. Words to Live By –
on the strategies for getting health care behind the walls

3. Breaking the Chains –
on the inspirational work of people who are currently/ formerly in prison fighting for the lives they want to lead

4. Try This Out –
on incredible organizations and projects across the country who are doing the hard work of rebuilding our communities in a time of mass imprisonment

5. The Big Picture –
on the political issues that drive the prison (and prison health!) crisis in our country

If you want to write an article on something you think is important for prison health, send it and we will consider publishing it in *Prison Health News*. You can also write us first to discuss ideas for articles.

If you want your name kept confidential, you can sign your article with your first name or “anonymous.”

Getting Out Alive:

by Teresa Sullivan

When I went to jail in 2005, one of the biggest problems that I had was at the medication window. One day going to get my HIV medications at the med window, I looked at the meds in the cup and they were the wrong meds. There was one too many of the same meds for my HIV medications, and one med I never saw before. This was a big problem because I know that taking the wrong dose of my meds would make me sick – and the med that I had never seen before, my doctor did not order for me.

Being told if I did not take the medication in the cup that I would have to go to the hole – that made me very scared, and so I took the medications. Let me say, if I knew what I know today I would have never taken the medications. I got so sick that they had to take me to the ER and I could have died. It is important to know your rights about taking medication while in jail.

Today I am an advocate for people that have HIV/AIDS and are in the county jails system. I will never let this happen to someone again while they are in the county jails system. I will always make sure that they know their rights about taking their medications while in jail, and when they are about to come home, I will continue to advocate for their needs.

I thank GOD for John Bell, because when my son came to visit me, I told him what was happening to me with my medication. My son called Philadelphia FIGHT for me and talked to John Bell and told him what was

Advocating for Your Meds

happening to his mother in jail and asked could he please go see her and help his mother. John Bell's job is to advocate for people in the county jails system living with the HIV/AIDS virus. John Bell came to see me, and I told him what was happening to me with my medications. By the next day, I got the right medications that I needed to stay alive.

Today, not only do I advocate for those in the county jails, I am also the Teaching Assistant for the program at Philadelphia FIGHT called TEACH Outside. This is a basic HIV/AIDS 101 educational and life skills program that teaches those living with the virus how to advocate for themselves and how to learn to live again on the outside.

Know your rights when it comes to advocating for your medications!

Before going to the medication window, you should have had communication with the doctor about what meds you will be taking. Secondly, you should ask the doctor if they have a med chart for you to look at so you know what your meds are and what they look like. *THIS IS YOUR RIGHT.*

If, for some reason, when you go to the medication window the meds don't look right to you, ask the nurse to please check the doctor's order again.

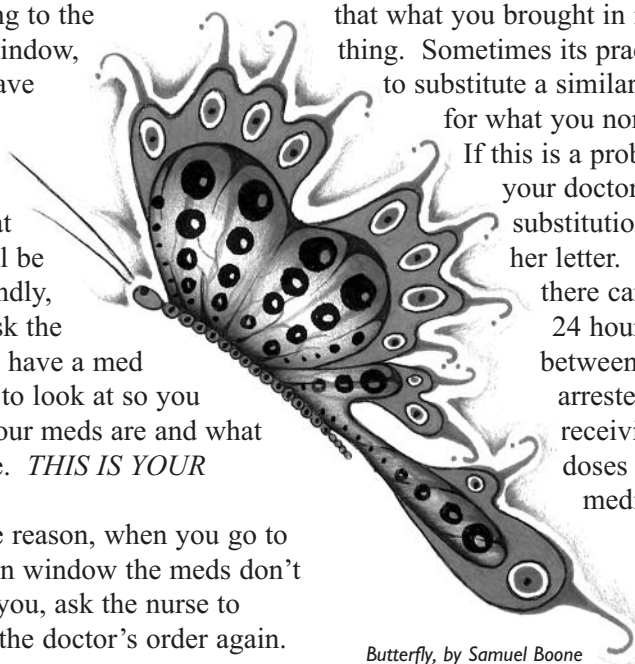
THIS IS YOUR RIGHT.

Because sometimes the nurses may be in a rush and they can make mistakes, these mistakes can make you sick or could kill you if you do not advocate about your meds. *THIS IS YOUR RIGHT.*

Too often, people in prison don't know their meds when going to the med window, and too often they don't ask questions about what they are taking, because they don't know that they have the right to advocate for themselves. If the nurse does not answer your question, then ask to talk to the sergeant on duty. *THIS IS YOUR RIGHT.*

Once you're in jail, medical staff supply you with your regular prescription medications. Usually the jail staff dispenses only medication from its infirmary, since it won't trust that what you brought in is the real thing. Sometimes its practitioners try to substitute a similar medication for what you normally use.

If this is a problem, have your doctor specify "no substitutions" in his or her letter. Sometimes, there can be a lag of 24 hours or more between getting arrested and receiving regular doses of your medication.



Butterfly, by Samuel Boone

From the Crack House to the White

by Waheedah Shabazz-El

I'm the person who thought I would kick the bucket from addiction in that crack house, where I lived and died on a daily basis, seven years ago.

I'm the person who had a good job but couldn't get to it because I was stuck in that crack house, where I lived and died on a daily and nightly basis. I'm the person who finally got arrested in a drug raid at that crack house where I lived when the Narcotics Unit moved in with their SWAT Team. I'm the person who landed in jail with a bail that was way out of the reach of my family, so I sat for six months (had to remain in jail).

I'm the person who took a test for HIV while I sat...whose results came back positive, compounded with an AIDS diagnosis. I'm the person who would lie in that cell at night and instead of dreaming I entertained thoughts of death and dying...not by way of crack this time, but by way of HIV. Contemplating the "Hell Fire" because I had contracted AIDS, gotten myself hooked on drugs, now I was sitting in jail facing a load of felony convictions...and I was a Muslim. The only thing I was certain of at that time was how close I had been drawn to the Hell Fire.

I'm the person who had made a shambles of her life and decided that death was the only way out. I'm the person who wished for death...but just like all my other wishes that never came true...death never came either. That was seven years ago. But, then they say seven is a lucky number.

Seven weeks ago December 8, 2009, I'm the person who was invited to the White House to participate in a discussion with some of President Obama's top officials on crafting a National HIV/AIDS Strategy with the specific needs of Women as a priority of that legislation. I knew it was real and I knew I was awake because even in my wildest dreams I never thought this was something I could achieve, especially after addiction, incarceration and AIDS.

What a journey, from seven years ago, being that person who was diagnosed with AIDS, drug addicted and sitting in that jail waiting and wishing for a death that never came. What did come, however, was a mentor through a prison reentry linkage program. That mentor, John H. Bell, came in the person of a formerly incarcerated individual who had beat a drug addiction and who had survived living with HIV for over 20 years. I listened intently to this mentor tell me the challenges he had overcome; who he was now and where he had come from. By the end of that teary-eyed visit, I had become that person who had gained some clarity of purpose and had experienced an awakening of the spirit. My focus was no longer on how I was going to die in jail with a drug addiction and AIDS. My focus was now about how I was going to live in society when I got out. I was no longer the person looking at where I had been. I was becoming the person who was envisioning where I

House

was going from that moment on. Believe you me; the White House was not a part of that vision.

Released on house arrest to my son's home, I carried with me the secret about my AIDS diagnosis, but I also carried that spiritual awakening that had come about through my mentor. Even though the courts didn't stipulate me, I knew I had to get into a drug and alcohol program because my incarceration was a direct result of my addiction. And I knew in order to gain acceptance and become empowered over my AIDS diagnosis (like my mentor), I had to seek out the services and support systems that had worked for him. Sounds pretty simple? For me, these were the magic bullets.



Today I am a person who no longer uses drugs, a day at a time. **I'm a person** who gives back what was so freely given to her. I have become a mentor for people just like me. No individual becomes a hero by themselves. It is only by working together that we can bring justice to the world. Even President Obama has let people down by proposing a freeze on spending for lifesaving programs in our communities. We need to raise our voices now.

Today I am a person for whom HIV is no longer a secret. In contrast, HIV turned out to be a situation that has brought significant purpose to my life. **Today I am the person** who no longer wishes for death, but instead I

aspire to immortality through being a resonating voice for those behind bars, in addictions recovery and women living with HIV/AIDS who haven't found their own voices yet or who choose to speak softly.

I'm that person who has gone from scared to fierce, dying to living, secrets to acceptance, addiction to recovery, from nightmares to dreams, from hell and back... **from the Crack House to the White House.**

Hearts on a Wire

by Najee Gibson

A lot of people from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community feel lonely in prison because either their families gave up hope for them, or they're so caught up in the system that they feel like there's no hope for them when they come out.

I did 5 ½ years. I heard about Hearts on a Wire like 2 months before I got released from prison. They were doing an anonymous questionnaire for members of the LGBT community in state facilities: Were you getting health care? How were you being treated? I took the survey and informed them that I was going to be released in April. So they opened their arms and told me to come into the office.

That's how I got plugged in, and from there, things started to blossom. I liked what I heard. All of us need to be understood and cared for, and someone to identify with our hurt. Hearts on a Wire could identify with my hurt, and the bullshit that I put up with being incarcerated, being a person of color – the no-nos, the punishments. Hearts on a Wire is about 2 years old. We cater to inmates in state facilities in Pennsylvania. We meet one night a week, and you pass on what was given to you. We make cards that say, "Keep your head up," and send them to inmates.

The survey's been done, and one definite concrete thing we know is that there's no safe sex protection given out in state facilities. I feel very strongly about that, and it's one of the main things we're going to aim for. In

Philadelphia county jails, you can get condoms off the commissary list or go to the nurses' station, no questions asked, but in the state facilities, it's like, no. Automatically you are engaging in sexual activities, and that is one of the top-notch no-nos, and they call that sodomizing. An inmate gets a misconduct and put in a restrictive housing unit. And if someone's coming up for parole, that can hold them back.

From the door, you're stripped of any kind of dignity. Once I had on some jailhouse eyeliner – I took some Vaseline and a lead pencil and rubbed it on a piece of white paper, and made a light paste. This CO's response was, "If you don't wipe that off your eyes, you're going to get a misconduct for disobeying a direct order."

There are certain facilities where glitter is not allowed. We made a card and we sprinkled some glitter with some Elmer's glue, and the card got sent back. Security will either tell them to destroy it, or they'll see our P.O. box and they won't let the person have that mail.

Some people walk around for 5 years and don't go on medication when they need to, so that nobody will know they have HIV. First the staff knows, and then it cascades. It's supposed to be confidential. But certain staff and folks in prison were like, "Damn, why are you in the



>> Look for "Glitter is not Allowed: Experiences of Trans and Gender Variant People in Pennsylvania's Prison Systems," a report by Hearts on a Wire on the results of their survey with LGBT people in Pennsylvania prisons. It will be released this summer!

pill line? You got the hot shit?" I'd lie, "No, I'm a diabetic."

There are some hateful people who feel that you should just be silent and let whatever happens happen to you. I encourage everyone to find out your senator's address – yes, you might get their secretary writing you back, but it's going to come back as legal mail. When you get legal mail, you're called to the front desk to sign a list. And they'll say, "This one knows how to read and write." Because I'm sorry to say, the stigma attached to a lot of people of color and of the LGBT community who are incarcerated is that we're dumb. So I'd encourage, even as a front – keep a book in your hand.

Prayer and meditation help, staying aware of your surroundings, and also reaching out to the outside world. You have to network. At Hearts on a Wire, we're not case managers, but we steer people in the right direction. You're going to know about resources like

food banks. It helps to
know of AIDS
service



organizations, so if you do have the virus, you can get care when you get out. If you're transgender, we know which doctor is best, so you don't have to go out and prostitute to buy hormones or be looked at like a freak, and the doctor's like, "I can't write you a script for that." So when you get a letter from Hearts on a Wire, I encourage people of the LGBT community, and even those who are not, to write back. Because you're going to hear back from us.

Beyond writing and answering letters, Hearts on a Wire attended a meeting for re-entry services in Philadelphia and presented a list of demands. We are hoping to do more political, anti-prison and gender liberationist work in the future. We would encourage people in other states to get started with just the basics. Get some construction paper and crayons, and start writing to people who are incarcerated from the LGBT community. It doesn't take much. One or two people can do a lot of things. It could be small – it could be in somebody's basement. Mail is very, very, very important. It makes you feel wanted when you get a letter.

You can say you've been adopted by the activist community. I've learned that there's hope. There's people who care. There's power in voices.

For more information, write to:

Hearts on a Wire

P.O. Box 36831

Philadelphia, PA 19107

"To Help Our People Through This"

by *Suzy Subways*

Reverend Doris Green, founder of Men and Women in Prison Ministries and director of community affairs at the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, has been working with people in prison and their families for decades, and fighting AIDS since the epidemic began. She is organizing a coalition of grassroots community organizations to demand access to condoms in the Illinois state prison system, based on the knowledge that good prison health is good community health.

She believes that people in prison are not "criminals," but members of families and neighborhoods. "The people on the inside are the people on the outside," she says. Rev. Green sees her political advocacy as

intimately connected with her counseling work with individuals and small groups, rebuilding the community support networks torn apart by mass imprisonment.

Because of mandatory minimum sentences, discriminatory crack possession laws, three-strikes laws and other hallmarks of the "war on drugs," there are now 10 times as many people in prison than there were 20 years ago. People of African descent represent 56% of those imprisoned for drug offenses but only 14% of illicit drug users.

"The disparity makes you think nobody's committing crimes but African Americans and Hispanics," Rev. Green says. In the past decade,

When the Legal System Fails



The Entire Family is Incarcerated

new policies shut formerly incarcerated people out of public housing, jobs, and social safety net programs.

With so many parents, children, spouses and caregivers removed from the community, the emotional, financial and political support systems of entire communities are disrupted. “It’s a strain, not having your loved one at home,” Rev. Green says. “It’s not just him doing the time – the loved one has to do that time too.”

Without support systems that help individuals through crises of poverty, they may need to become involved in the sex trade or drug trade in order to survive – and both of these increase the risk of HIV and imprisonment. AIDS is the leading cause of death for Black women ages 25 to 34, and the reality that the U.S. has the highest rate of imprisonment in human history has everything to do with that statistic.

“As a people, we really need to fix some of the pain that people are experiencing because of racism,” Rev. Green says. “We have to become the psychologists, or whatever we can do to help our people through this time.”

She comes to this work as one who knows from personal experience and can facilitate the sharing of wisdom and compassion between those who have been there. “Family members didn’t understand me being in a relationship with someone in prison. I had nobody to talk to for many years. That pain is what birthed this ministry and support groups for family members of incarcerated people.”

Rev. Green counsels and marries couples divided by prison walls, and even for monogamous partners she stresses that condoms are essential upon release. Speaking in particular to the experience of heterosexuals but with words of wisdom for everyone, she says, “A lot of women are excited that the man is coming home, and they don’t take precautions. If you’ve been faithful, and he’s been faithful, you still need to use condoms until you’ve been tested. It’s not about trust – it’s about caring enough for yourself and him caring enough for you.”

But working with couples to heal the pain of being separated by prison walls is a difficult process. The interpersonal impact of incarceration always brings Rev. Green back to the root of the problem. What if we stopped relying on prisons for the illusion of safety? “There’s another way to look at this besides ‘Lock them up and throw away the key,’” she says. “What about restitution? If you break into my house and steal my stuff, I want my stuff back. If they lock you up, I’m not getting my stuff back. I want you working and paying me back. Imprisonment is a multi-billion dollar industry. If you have prisoners and products, you have a profit. We need to call it what it is. We abolished slavery, we can stop this prison stuff too.”

*For more information, please contact:
Men and Women in Prison Ministries
10 W. 35th Street # 9C5-2
Chicago, IL 60616*

Staying Safe and Healthy in Prison

by John, Waheedah, Mary, Teresa and Ben

We know that there is still a lot of stigma around HIV in prisons and jails across the country, and that access to accurate information can be one of the most important things for fighting that stigma.

Throughout the month of June, our prison outreach team meets with every CO in the Philly jails at shift change to do HIV 101 presentations. Our team is made up of people with HIV, all of whom are formerly incarcerated. Many of us were diagnosed with HIV in the Philly jails. We do these presentations to break through the fear that drives HIV stigma, so that everyone has the information they need to stay safe and healthy.

Here's what you need to know...

HIV is **ONLY** in:

1. Blood
2. Semen
3. Vaginal Fluids
4. Breast Milk

For you to get HIV, that fluid has to get inside your body. So people are exposed by having unprotected sex, sharing needles if they're using drugs, and breast-feeding their babies.

People do **NOT** get HIV through:

- Spitting or Coughing, because HIV isn't airborne;
- Sweat, because HIV isn't in sweat;
- Touching, because HIV can't live on the skin;
- Feces; it's Hepatitis A that is transmitted through feces, not HIV.

HIV exposure can happen in jails and prisons. But for most of the things you will encounter on the inside, the risk of getting HIV is *really* low.

Fights—If you are assaulted or are trying to break up a fight, even if there is blood, HIV cannot get into your body unless it enters an open cut.

Bites—Even getting bitten doesn't put you at much risk for getting HIV. HIV isn't in spit. When you get cut, blood rushes out—not in. So even if someone breaks your skin with their teeth, it would be hard for HIV from their body to get inside yours.

Sex does happen behind bars. Condoms are provided on a limited basis in some places, including state prisons in Vermont and Mississippi and in city jails in New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Francisco and the District of Columbia. Methadone maintenance programs are rare, and no U.S. prison has a needle-exchange program.

If you find out that someone in your facility is HIV positive, keep that information confidential. It is up to them to decide who, and when, they feel safe telling. It could put them at risk if you tell others and take this decision away from them.

For more information, please contact:

*John Bell, Waheedah Shabazz-El,
Mary Coco, Teresa Sullivan, and
Ben Green of Philadelphia FIGHT's
prison outreach team
(see page 12 for FIGHT's address)*

information resources for people in prison

If you need information while you are locked up, contact:

Fortune News

The Fortune Society
ATTN: Fortune News Subscriptions
29-76 Northern Boulevard
Long Island City, NY 11101
newsletter on criminal justice issues;
to subscribe, send your first name, last
name, ID number, correctional facility,
address, city, state, zipcode
*free to people in prison.

HCV Advocate

PO Box 427037
San Francisco, CA 94142
monthly newsletter on hepatitis C
events, clinical research, and education
(materials also available in Spanish).
*sample issue free to people in prison;
\$10 for a year's subscription

Just Detention International

3325 Wilshire Blvd, Ste 340
Los Angeles, CA 90010
support, resources and advocacy to
address sexual violence behind bars;
survivors should address Legal Mail to
Cynthia Totten, Esq.
*free to people in prison

Partnership for Safety and Justice

825 NE 20th Avenue, #250
Portland, OR 97232
support directory with health and legal
organizations, prison book programs,
resources for LGBT people, and more!
*free to people in prison

Prison Legal News

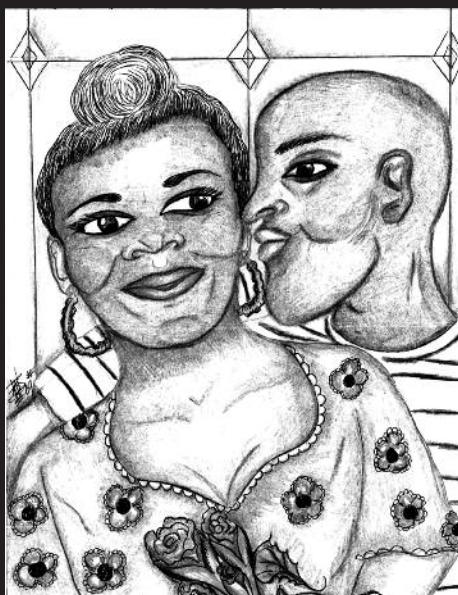
P.O. Box 2420
West Brattleboro, VT 05303
newsletter on the legal rights of people
in prison & recent court rulings
*sample issue \$3.50, unused stamps
OK; \$24 for 1-year subscription

Project Inform

1375 Mission Street
San Francisco, CA 94103-2621
Hotline: 800-822-7422
information & newsletters on HIV
(materials also available in Spanish);
responses to treatment questions from
people in prison
*free to people in prison

Protecting Your Health & Safety: Prisoners' Rights

325-pg bound manual explains the
legal rights to health and safety in
prison, and how to enforce those rights
when they are violated.
publication of the Southern Poverty Law
Center, distributed by:
Prison Legal News
P.O. Box 2420
West Brattleboro, VT 05303
*\$16 for people in prison



by Brakie

advocacy and support resources for people in prison

If you need help while you are locked up, or when you get out, contact:

In Austin, TX:

AIDS Services of Austin
P.O. Box 4874
Austin, TX 78765
Phone: (512) 458-2437
Web: www.asaustin.org

In Boston, MA:

SPAN Inc.
105 Chauncy Street, 6th Floor
Boston, MA 02111
Phone: (617) 423-0750
Web: www.spaninc.org

In Chicago, IL:

Men and Women in Prison Ministries
10 W. 35th Street # 9C5-2
Chicago, IL 60616
Phone: (312) 328-9610
Web: www.mwipm.com

In Los Angeles, CA:

Center for Health Justice
900 Avila Street #301
Los Angeles, CA 90012
Phone: (213) 229-0985
Prison Hotline: (213) 229-0979
Web: www.healthjustice.net

In New Orleans, LA:

Women With A Vision
1515 South Salcedo Street, Suite 212
New Orleans, Louisiana 70125
Phone: (504) 301-0428
Web: www.wwav-no.org

In New York, NY:

New York Harm Reduction Educators
953 Southern Boulevard, Suite 302
Bronx, NY 10459
Phone: (718) 842-6050
Web: www.nyhre.org

In Philadelphia, PA:

Philadelphia FIGHT
1233 Locust Street, 5th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19107
Phone: (215) 985-4448
Web: www.fight.org

If you need resources in a city not listed here, **write to us!** We will help you track down answers to your specific questions.

Write to us if you know about a great organization that is not yet listed here as a PHN partner.

prison health news

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