

Emergency money channeled to housing agencies for PWAs

City releases \$300,000 to prevent collapse of groups

by Kai Wright

The city's Agency for HIV/AIDS disbursed \$300,000 in funds on November 3 to private organizations under contract with the city to provide housing assistance to low income people with HIV/AIDS. Checks were given out at a meeting of 65 AIDS service organizations, called by AHA and the D.C. CARE Consortium to explain changes at the beleaguered government agencies following last week's removal of AHA administrator Mel Wilson.

The funds came as an emergency measure to prevent the collapse of five of the seven private nonprofit organizations under contract with the city to assist low-income people with



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HIV/AIDS in securing housing. AHA has failed to release over \$500,000 to those organizations since June — money that is part of a \$1.7 million U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grant.

AHA and D.C. CARE officials met last week with the vendors in danger of closing to determine their "most pressing needs," said Department of Health spokesperson Phillipa Mezile. Based on that meeting, AHA submitted a request for the emergency funds to the D.C. Control Board and the money was released to D.C. CARE on Oct. 31.

Mezile also noted that, based on the expected release of the emergency funds, AHA made arrangements with PEPCO and Washington Gas to continue service to the vendors' clients.

Todd Douglas, director of housing programs at AHA, said that in addition to disbursing the emergency funds, AHA has finished processing the original grant and that it is now up to the Office of the Controller to release the checks. Douglas could not say when that will occur.

"We're not as pressed as we

were," said Douglas, "but we're still pressed."

Douglas's statement summarized the theme of the Nov. 3 meeting, which D.C. CARE Executive Director Valerie Papaya Mann described as "an opportunity to begin healing."

Representatives from 65 AIDS services vendors were asked to attend the invitation-only meeting. The groups listened to the city agencies explain planned improvements, but did not appear convinced that those changes would actually take place.

The delay in disbursing money to housing vendors was only the latest crisis involving AHA's failure to process grants in a timely fashion and disburse funds to financially strapped organizations. During the past two years, bureaucratic logjams have kept AHA from spending between \$600,000 and \$1.5 million of appropriated funds for a variety of AIDS programs.

Acting AHA Administrator Dr. Chukwudi Saunders, who is senior deputy director at DOH, introduced a "senior management team" that will run AHA during the process of searching for a new administrator. She stressed that everyone will report directly to her, repeatedly promising new levels of accountability at the agency.

But Saunders will only be in place for two to four weeks, said DOH's Mezile. During that time, officials will search for a longer-term acting administrator — one they hope will come from inside DOH.

A national search process for a permanent administrator is under way, but Mezile could not say how long the process is expected to take.

Both Saunders and D.C. CARE's Mann also urged the AIDS community not to question the city agencies' commitment to service.

"We are not the enemy, we are in fact the ally," pleaded Mann. "And if we don't do this together, it won't work!"

Saunders listed a number of organizational changes, effective immediately, that AHA officials hope will increase accountability at the agency and quicken the pace of processing grants. Among those changes are:

- the imposition of an interim "senior management team" consisting of 11 people, each responsible for a different aspect of the agency's programs and each answerable directly to Saunders;
- the appointment of six new program heads — as part of the new management team — filling two of 25 vacant positions at AHA; and,
- the appointment of two full-time administrators and two full-time program assistants dedicated solely to the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP).



D.C. CARE's Valerie Papaya Mann said the meeting was "an opportunity to begin healing."

Several members of the management team also spoke to the attendees, promising changes in the way their individual programs have been run.

The group was told, among other things, that over 80 pending ADAP applications would be processed within the next two weeks, that Ryan White Title I vendors would be informed by the end of the week about whether their two-year contracts will be renewed next March, that a renewed commitment will be made to distributing educational material to the city's many clubs and bars, and that changes will be made in the agency's financial reporting system.

But the AIDS services vendors did not appear to be impressed with the litany of promised improvements. Many said they had heard it all before, and that they were sick of getting such promises every time a crisis develops.

"We are clapping at things that are routine in other cities," said Earl Fowlkes of Damien Ministries. "I'm not convinced that things are going to change....If you don't make these changes, six months from now a lot of us are going to be out of business."

Dee Curry, a person with AIDS on the Ryan White Planning Council and a transgender activist, sounded a similar tone, "We can't afford to have a city agency that waits for a crisis to come."

Others pointed out that the agency has gone through more than one transition in the past; Wilson is the third consecutive AHA administrator to leave the job amid controversy.

"I want to be optimistic. Every time this has happened, we want to be optimistic," said Whitman-Walker Clinic executive director Jim Graham. "The fact that these problems have gone on year after year suggests to me that we have got a problem that is endemic." ▼