

WNCAP Responds to Issues Raised

by Barry Ward, Vice-President of WNCAP's Board of Directors

Last month's article about the Western North Carolina AIDS Project has helped tremendously with a more detailed airing of some of the key issues. Prior to this article, the issues had been presented in a vague format--so vague, in fact, that it has been difficult for a responsible board to address them or make a determination about their pervasiveness.

Certainly, WNCAP relies on maintaining and building upon its constructive and productive relationship with the gay community--and it has been supported largely by this community from its roots.

From the outset, we have insisted that AIDS/HIV infection is "not just a gay disease." And we were right. One has only to look at the statistics to see the rapid growth in other segments of the population. In the early days, we were "caring for our own." But should the leadership role we have assumed in support of PWA's cease when we are faced with the trials this disease presents to others?

Understandably, there is some resentment that other segments of the community have not come forward with their share of financial support for PWA's and the Project. But awareness levels are

notoriously slow to build for agencies like WNCAP. And until it is genuinely perceived that HIV/AIDS is hitting other groups as hard as it has hit the gay community, the call to action will be slow. Let's face it. Perception is reality.

To my knowledge, WNCAP is the only AIDS service organization in the state that actually provides direct financial support for clients--thanks to the gay community. Eventually, support WILL come from other segments. And the argument can be made that, unless we reach out to all segments, we are unlikely to ever garner the support we need outside of the gay community.

In our recent presentation to the United Way, we shared with the panel the fact that our actual 1990 experience has been double our projections. The numbers don't lie and they demonstrate that this is truly a growing, community-wide issue that deserves growing, community-wide support.

WNCAP has grown--perhaps much too rapidly--from a group of interested people to a busy, full-fledged agency. As an officer of the Board, I believe that we must be good stewards of the money people have worked so hard to raise. This means we must have rules, criteria, qualifiers--a measure of bureaucracy.

Certainly, we are interested in providing the kind of financial assistance needed for medical care, food, shelter or other basic needs. But I don't think we want money to be doled out indiscriminately, perhaps supporting a problem with substance abuse. Hopefully, rules serve as "equalizers" rather than "discrimination."

This brings me to "Our House," another project strongly supported by the hard work and dollars of the gay community. We strive to make the environment there as safe and as pleasant as possible. This means that there must be policies, rules and admission criteria. On the one hand, we hear that the rules are too strict or that they are not applied equally. On the other hand we hear that not enough attention is paid to the compatibility of the residents. Are these two issues at odds?

"Compatibility," at best, is subjective. Depending upon the problems and issues of applicants or residents, some people have more rules to follow than others. We don't believe the problems of one resident should be imposed on the others. This is one way we can assure some measure of "compatibility."

"Our House" is communal living. It is not private and, as such, it is not for everyone. That is why we feel that one of the most valuable roles the Housing Committee can play is to help us identify a variety of low-cost, alternative housing options for PWA's. With a comprehensive listing of these alternatives, people who need or desire

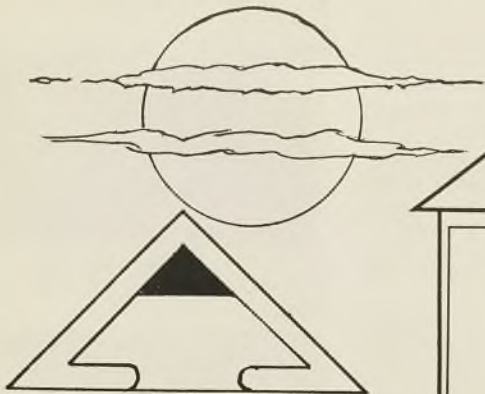
more privacy can be referred elsewhere and, hopefully, at a lower cost than what is generally on the market. I think we all agree that "Our House" should be only one of many options available for PWA's.

There was a mandate at our Board retreat last summer for a comprehensive needs assessment to help give direction to WNCAP. We have received grant funding which will help us develop and implement the assessment. Housing, among many other issues, will be addressed. This does not mean that a separate, more detailed survey of housing or other issues and needs is not warranted. But all research can and should be coordinated for a more valid result.

When we receive the results of the assessment(s), we will convene the Board, committee members, the Mountain AIDS Coalition and all other interested persons at another retreat and develop a program of work for each aspect of the Project. This will insure a coordinated approach and either affirm or call into question the types of services WNCAP provides and the people for whom they are provided. Hopefully, this will give those who are involved with WNCAP a greater sense of purpose and value to the time and energy they commit.

Of course, a rapidly growing organization needs a good director. Brenda Youngblood has brought a high level of energy, interest and talent to

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