

Public Health funding cuts resulted in MCAVHN absorbing ...

For 23 years, the Mendocino County AIDS/Viral Hepatitis Network has wowed the community with its annual Event of the Heart Fundraiser.

The organization, incorporated in 1987, kicked off the first event in 1988. "We were an all-volunteer agency then," explains executive director Libby Guthrie. "This was long before federal funding, and MCAVHN survived because of the Event of the Heart."

Today, MCAVHN's economic picture is almost as bleak as it must have seemed to the first volunteers who offered support and information for those afflicted by or at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

This year's gala event will be held at the Ukiah Conference Center. The venue change, made last year, met with resounding approval. "We used to have a separate dinner and dance. Now the event is combined," explains Guthrie. "People enjoyed staying and socializing after dinner."

The event is sponsored by Lee Adams, attorney; Blue Drug, Bowers Financial Services, Dave Grozinger Architectural Services, Hawkes Construction, Hydro Pacific, Price Waterman, Savings Bank of Mendocino County and the Ukiah Valley Medical Center.

The success of this event is crucial for MCAVHN. "We've had severe cutbacks. We were particularly hit because of specific state and federal cuts to AIDS services." Guthrie doesn't mince words. "We've been gutted."

Private foundations - formerly MCAVHN's reliable funders - Guthrie explains. Public Health funding cuts resulted in MCAVHN absorbing additional clients and services.

One of the most important aspects of the Event of the Heart is that these donated dollars are unrestricted. "Most state and foundation funding has very specific guidelines for how their money is spent. Currently we don't have enough money to pay for staffing. This fundraiser will really help us fill the gaps."

Clients are scattered throughout the county. "We are having great difficulty with rural outreach," says Guthrie. "When we had 12 staff we were doing very well. Now our rural residents are severely underserved."

The coastal MCAVHN office is closed, and areas like Covelo, which used to have weekly outreach visits, are on their own. "Rural areas are hidden infection sites. Many people living in these areas do not access services. We have to go to them," says Guthrie.

The latest statistics on AIDS are staggering, according to Bradley Wright, outreach worker. "There are 56,000 new infections each year. A half million of those who are HIV positive do not receive regular medical care. And there is no state contract in this county to do HIV testing or counseling," notes Wright.

"People don't worry about AIDS or Hep C, because they know there are agencies that take care of it. If funding goes away, our patients will be treated at the Emergency Room, the rural clinics and by private physicians. MCAVHN wouldn't be missed until it was gone," she notes.

In Mendocino County, Hepatitis C is insidious and pervasive. "Through our syringe exchange population, we discovered 80 to 90 percent of our exchange partners were infected with Hepatitis C. These people are very disenfranchised. Most have no health care providers. We expanded our mission to assist those with Hepatitis C," Guthrie explains.

Nearly half of those with HIV are afflicted with Hep C. "We address the Hep C issues aggressively. People may die of liver disease before opportunistic infections."

There is no typical MCAVHN client. "We serve Baby Boomers who used recreational drugs in the '60s. We have Vietnam vets, young people, heterosexual individuals - there are many hidden substance abusers in our community," says Guthrie. MCAVHN's reputation for confidentiality, sound information and compassionate care have made the organization a place people trust, and Guthrie hopes the public will acknowledge their hard work by supporting the Event of the Heart.

The red-carpet event is scheduled for Saturday, Feb. 13. The gourmet dinner, catered by Kilkenny Kitchen, starts with crostini spread with camembert

and berry, profiteroles filled with warm artichoke and Asiago cheese and filo cups filled with chicken apple sausage and bleu cheese. The main course buffet includes mixed greens with pear, walnut and feta cheese, saut Sumptuous desserts, Fetzer wines and coffee will be served. Flowers are being donated by Rain Forest Fantasy.

Music will be provided by Twice As Good - brothers hailing from the Elem Indian Colony whose blues-based, soulful guitar and vocals have led them across the U.S., with four albums to their name, sharing the stage with Charlie Musselwhite, Norton Buffalo and Joe Louis Walker.

Guthrie is looking for trips, wine tours, services, dinners, getaways and other special auction items to complete the auction lineup. The cutoff date for donations is Feb. 5. She is also hoping a few more businesses will become event sponsors. Financial considerations have reduced the number of major sponsors this year.

Tickets are available at the Mendocino Book Company or at the MCAVHN office on 148 Clara Ave. Credit card orders can be placed at 462-1932.

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