

The Resource Center Dallas is the largest HIV support and education system in North Texas. The Center takes a holistic approach to the treatment of HIV and AIDS and works with leaders of the Dallas community, both HIV positive and negative, to educate the population about the disease and correct many of the misconceptions and myths that surround it. HIV is the disease with the most social repercussions since leprosy. A cancer diagnosis or heart attack immediately draw support. Meals are prepared, prayers are offered, or carpools are driven during recovery and treatment. But HIV is *different*.

In part due to the panic surrounding the beginning of the HIV epidemic, misconceptions about the disease and how one should protect oneself against it abound. HIV-positive people are marginalized, and with the diagnosis of HIV comes a series of character judgments that are not found with other diseases. RCD provides a safe place for HIV positive people. The nutrition program specifically works to provide a nutritional supplement and social outlet to address the physical and psychological changes that result from an HIV diagnosis. Through their hot lunch program, clients can receive about 40% of their daily caloric intake in the form of a balanced hot meal that includes a hot protein, a starch, vegetables and assorted salads. This program also provides the valuable opportunity for clients to socialize with other clients who are HIV positive. A situation like that has been shown to improve adherence to a medical regimen and a sense of social support, both of which are crucial to maintaining health. The food pantry allows clients to take groceries with them and gives the client a

shopping experience and the power to make positive nutrition choices for themselves, which has also been shown to improve health outcomes.

As a nutrition intern, I worked with both of these programs as well as their community health nurse. Each time a client came in to use the food pantry, their weight was recorded into a data system that already had their height, allowing for a BMI to be recorded for each client each weekly visit. I looked at the client BMIs over the course of a year and tracked the clients' changes in BMI and linked it to our nutrition programs. This information was then used to apply for funding for the food pantry from United Way. I was able to work in the Client Services sector of the Resource Center, helping the clients renew their information and becoming familiar with the AIRE system, a database that allows sharing of client information between organizations across many states, which can also lead to improved treatment strategies due to improved communication. In both the pantry and the hot meals program, I assisted the clients in checking into the services and was able to interact with the clients on a personal level. By forming friendships with the clients, I was able to get a much clearer idea about the needs of HIV positive communities in the United States.

My conversations with the clients, the volunteers and the staff of the Resource Center were some of the most rewarding experiences of my internship. Everyone I worked with was so passionate about HIV education and treating the clients with the respect and courtesy they would receive at a doctor's office, restaurant or any for-profit organization. In addition to learning a lot about the changing demographics of HIV in the urban United States, I expanded my knowledge of non-profit organizations and what it takes to run one. I have so much respect and admiration for how the Resource

Center operates. By addressing the social, emotional, medical and nutritional needs of their clients, they are moving towards a community that is truly healthy as opposed to a community with a low viral load.

The Resource Center was an overwhelmingly positive place for me to work. I formed many close friendships that I plan to maintain, and I felt like my time there helped people and it gave me a new sense of gratitude for my life. I learned more about a disease that I have always been interested in, and I was able to get wonderful hands-on experience. Like any situation, there were good days and bad days. The medication for HIV is taxing on the body, and many people affected by the disease in Dallas are transgender, gay or fall under some other category that marginalizes them. Some of clients that I worked for were struggling with poverty, addiction or abuse, which, understandably, can take a toll on one's emotional state. I would get flustered when I addressed a transgender person by a pronoun they did not identify with, or when a client would act aggressively towards me if I was unable to handle a request they had or if there was a long wait. These situations were simply a practice in empathy. I learned that the best way to diffuse a situation was to stay positive but respectful. I made it my goal to give the client I was working with 100% of my attention and to make them feel welcome and cared for while they were at the Center, because the world can be a cruel place, especially for a group of people who are socially isolated by poverty, illness, race or sexuality.

This internship confirmed for me that I want to continue to work in a medical and public health field. I would very much like to continue studying HIV and AIDS, but I would like to look at it from a global perspective, although I really enjoyed getting to

learn about it in my own community first. Getting to work as closely as I did with the staff of such a successful organization allowed me to get valuable career advice from people who are familiar with the field and who are updated with the changes in policy and medical progress that will be changing the way HIV/AIDS is treated in our country in the near future. I realized how much I love working in a non-profit environment. It is certainly not glamorous, but it was immensely satisfying to understand that I was working with the demographic that needs help the most, but is also the least likely to receive it.

I am looking forward to maintaining my connection with the Resource Center. I still stay in contact with the friends I made there, and I fully intend to return as a volunteer and continue donating my time and money to an organization that I have seen make such a positive impact on my community.