

## Program Meets Opioid Users Where They Are

By Robert F. Smith

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Article has been edited for length.

**The explosion** in opioid use in this region has taken a social and cultural toll — especially the rise in the number of deaths due to overdoses, but also insidious and long-term health issues such as Hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS.

Providing those with substance use disorder a safe, non-judgmental place to receive supplies, help, and health care is key says Sue Conley, the AIDS Project's prevention and harm reduction program manager.

Conley said that for people with substance use disorder and under the influence of opioids, "their brain has been hijacked."

"It's not a matter of willpower. Stopping using creates a severe withdrawal. They feel like they are going to die if they don't reintroduce the opioid to their body," she said.

Because shame and punishment have proven ineffective in curbing the use of harmful opioids, the AIDS Project has taken a different approach through



its Harm Reduction Program in Bennington and Windham counties.

Instead of shaming people with substance use disorder, the program uses a compassionate, harm reduction approach.

At a free and anonymous walk-in program in Brattleboro, sterile syringes, condoms, and other harm reduction supplies are available, and sharps can be disposed of safely.

Narcan is available, along with testing for and information about HIV and Hepatitis C. Individuals who are ready can access health and substance-use



Left: Sue Conley and the APSV van loaded with harm reduction supplies. Above: Samba Diallo and Dakota Roberts at the Vermont State House in Montpelier, as part of a state wide collaboration for Overdose Awareness Day.

treatment and referrals. A doctor is available for telehealth consultations and Suboxone prescriptions, a medication-assisted treatment for substance use.

All of this is done with care, compassion, and welcoming of those who need the services.

"Joe," a person in recovery, said that he had been using the program off and on since it opened.

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**MOBILE DELIVERY**

APSV's Prevention & Harm Reduction Program offers mobile delivery in Bennington and Windham Counties.

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(call or text)



## AIDS Project of Southern Vermont

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Mission: Provide direct services to those whose lives are affected by HIV/AIDS, to offer education and supplies to help prevent its spread, and to promote understanding within the communities served.

Vision: Our community will become a place where new HIV infections are rare and when they do occur, every person, regardless of age, gender, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or socio-economic circumstance, will have unfettered access to high quality care, free from stigma and discrimination.

newsletter design: Mary Lynch Designs

# Welcome to Lama Tomás O'Flaherty

The AIDS Project of Southern Vermont is pleased to have Lama Tomás O'Flaherty join our Board of Directors.



Lama Tomás O'Flaherty is a Buddhist monk in the Order of Celtic Buddhist Monastics and has been serving the communities of people with substance use disorder since 2015.

Lama Tomás is a staff volunteer at Turning Point Recovery Center in Bellows Falls where he serves as a Recovery Coach and facilitates meetings for people in recovery and those dealing with grief.

Lama Tomás is a person with SUD in recovery for more than nine years and had a son who died from an overdose of Fentanyl five years ago so recovery and harm reduction are important pieces of his lived experience. He teaches spiritual approaches to addiction and recovery

in several rehab and recovery centers in New England and speaks on substance use disorder and recovery to family and community groups around the country.

Lama Tomás lives in Bellows Falls and is an active board member in several community related service organizations and other groups. He is the proud father of four living children and grandfather of six with number seven due this summer.

## THANK YOU

**Cheryl Duby:** AIDS Project thanks you for your service on our Board of Directors.

## STAFF UPDATES

We appreciate the energy, care and compassion that Loni Myran and Sam Warren expressed in their work with the participants of APSV's Harm Reduction Program and wish them well in their future endeavors.

## The Prevention and Harm Reduction Program offers:

- Syringe services and harm reduction supplies
- HIV and Hepatitis C testing and information
- Health and addiction treatment referrals
- Educational presentations to groups and agencies



All services of the AIDS Project are free. We are dedicated to improving the quality of life for people living with HIV and reducing the number of new infections in southern Vermont

**For more information: Sue:** 802 246-7147 / [sue@apsvt.org](mailto:sue@apsvt.org)  
**Samba:** 802 440-6776 / [samba@apsvt.org](mailto:samba@apsvt.org)

# GRATITUDE from Program Participants



**I can't tell you** how much I (and therefore my family) benefit from and appreciate you and all the staff at the exchange. The work you're all doing makes my life so immeasurably better.

I get flashes sometimes of an awareness of what this moment or that situation could and would be like without the safety and kindness that comes from having access to the people and services you provide and I am overcome with gratitude for my privilege as well as total despair for those less fortunate. I can't imagine how much harder my life would be without your support.

— SSP participant

**Can I please have a hug?** It's so good to see you two, every time I see that blue van I feel better, it's not just because you bring supplies but you also care about me and I can feel it. Keep being awesome.

— SSP participant, Bennington

**I've got a job** lined up and the manager is willing to give me more hours if I have a working phone. You've no idea what you just did for me by giving me a phone, this phone is going to get me a job and hopefully a place to stay so I won't have to sleep outside anymore.

— SSP participant, Bennington



## Program Meets Opioid Users Where They Are — *continued from page 1*

“Out of all the exchanges I've used, this is definitely one of the most caring and welcoming,” he said. “They are at the top of the list. They are trying to establish a good relationship with you, and not just treat you like a number.”

Joe explained that that is not always the case for people dealing with addictions.

“You get enough of being told you're at the bottom of society when you use drugs,” he said. “This program is a great place. I've always felt welcomed, and it's much needed.”

With heroin, “we have a powerful drug, and when fentanyl is added it becomes even stronger,” Conley says. “People try to reduce what they need, and then when they re-use, they

overdose, because their body has lost its ability to handle the dosage.”

Conley said she would like to see more overdose prevention programs and safe-use facilities around the country, and having nurses available to help with wound treatment and provide references to a doctor.

“We're all in this together, and we have to help each other,” Conley said. “This creates a place for people to stay alive until they can receive treatment to get off these substances. We can keep them alive until they can make a decision to change.”

“We do this with dignity and respect and we welcome people with love,” she added. “We're a place they can go to and not feel ashamed.”



Loni Myran of AIDS Project and Emily Whitworth of Better Life Partners, delivering smiles and education in Bennington!



**AIDS Project of Southern Vermont**

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**2022 ANNUAL REPORT** enclosed!

“ Thank you for reminding me that home is a place I belong, that there is a community for us all. Although my HIV status is negative, I grew up when the fear of AIDS was palpable. Thank God for the AIDS Project that provided community for me in a time of loneliness and fear. ”  
— Isaac



## UPCOMING EVENT

### 36th Annual AIDS Walk for Life

**May 20 / Brattleboro, VT**

10 am to noon, at the Centre Congregational Church



**Join us** as we honor **Alex Potter** for more than three decades of support to the community and individuals living with HIV in southern Vermont.

**Support us** by raising funds so we can continue our important work in southern Vermont.

For more information, contact us at 802 254-4444.



**AIDS Project of Southern Vermont**

**AND DON'T MISS** ►

