

News

A time of transition for AIDS Project of Southern Vermont

After 30 years with the nonprofit, Karen Peterson hands off the leadership job to Samba Diallo

By Robert F. Smith/*The Commons*, issue #695 (Wednesday, December 21, 2022)

BRATTLEBORO—On Jan. 13, Karen Peterson will step down as the executive director of Brattleboro’s AIDS Project of Southern Vermont (APSV), and Samba Diallo will move into that position.

Peterson has been at APSV for 30 years, since 1993, and Diallo has most recently run the project’s Harm Reduction Program.

APSV was started in 1987, one of the earliest grass roots organizations ever formed as the world began to recognize and respond to the AIDS epidemic.

In 1981, rare types of skin cancer and pneumonia, mainly found in gay men, led to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) establishing the term Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome in 1982. At that time, the syndrome was detected on five continents.

When asked why southern Vermont was so quick to respond, Peterson said, “Knowing what was happening across the country, we knew it would be coming here. It was affecting our friends and families.”

Started by volunteers, APSV began getting enough funding to start hiring paid staff in 1989.

“APSV is essentially two pieces,” Peterson said. “We provide direct services for people living with AIDS. Then we have a Harm Prevention program for folks at the highest risk.”

The Prevention Program provides syringes and other harm reduction supplies, testing for HIV and Hepatitis C, education programs, and substance abuse and recovery treatments and referrals. APSV also operates a small food pantry at its office at 15 Grove St. in Brattleboro for its clients.

At one time, Vermont had several organizations dealing with the AIDS epidemic. At this point there are three, with one service covering 10 counties in central and northern Vermont, and APSV serving Windham and Bennington counties.

“At this point, we have nine staff members,” Peterson said. “We have two on a grant that ends in February, but we hope to get enough funding to keep them on beyond that.”

Working with an average of 70 to 80 clients, the Project gets much of its funding from the CDC. They also do yearly fundraisers, including an annual drag show, which took place on Dec. 3, and a fundraising walk.

Peterson also specifically mentioned the fundraising work of Shirley Squires, a Guilford resident who has raised over \$430,000 for APSV over the past 30 years. Squires’ son Ron was an openly gay state legislator who died from AIDS-associated illnesses in 1993.

In recent years, Peterson said, one factor that has been very disturbing for those working with APSV and the LGBTQ community in general, has been the level of violence directed at it, including several mass killings. The Pride Center of Vermont in Burlington was vandalized in April, and people associated with the nonprofit have noted that they’d seen considerable increase in hate mail.

Peterson said she was also concerned that advances in treatments for medications to suppress the virus have led many people to feel that that the virus is no longer an issue.

“When we started,” she said, “we were basically helping people to die. People were very sick, and often had no family or a place to turn to. At one point a person with AIDS might be taking 30 medications a day, with horrible side effects.”

“Now, it’s down to one med a day, and they’ve essentially been given a new lease on life,” Peterson said. “But people need to realize there is still no cure.”

One positive result of the research on AIDS is that it made possible the incredibly quick development of the Covid vaccines, she said, because it was able to use the same technology.

Peterson said she is not exactly sure what the next phase of her life will be.

“It’s time to have a new chapter in my life,” she said. “I’m not quite sure what it is, but I have a few ideas.”
