Jose M. Davila: Advancing Bronx AIDS Services

Founded in 1986, Bronx AIDS Services (BAS) helps more than 8,000 HIV-positive and HIV-affected borough residents each year. The Bronx is the epicenter of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in New York City. BAS executive director Jose M. Davila shares his vision for the organization as it prepares for its 25th anniversary in 2011.

October 18, 2010 By Willette Francis

What inspired you to do HIV/AIDS work?

In the early 1980s, I was a young administrator at Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx. It became my responsibility to open and manage a medical unit dedicated to treat patients with a newly discovered disease, AIDS.

I saw a lot of young people come into this unit to basically die in shame and solitude, abandoned by their families and society. Those daily repeated painful scenes left a mark in my heart and soul that I have never been able to erase. I knew then that I would make a personal commitment to foster a more dignified way of helping persons affected by this terrible disease.

How did you get involved with Bronx AIDS Services?

S.J. Avery is my predecessor at BAS and a personal mentor. She knew me from the time we worked together at Lincoln Hospital. She called me in the spring of 1999 to ask for names of people I would recommend for a newly created chief operating officer position in the agency. I recommended myself and in June of 1999 I became BAS's first chief operating officer.

In July of 2005 I became executive director as part of a leadership transition plan approved by the board of directors.

What do you enjoy the most about your role at BAS?

I thoroughly enjoy the challenges of keeping an organization like BAS in the forefront of the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Bronx and knowing that we make an impact on people's lives with the work that we do.

My most enjoyable task, however, is to participate in the many creative discussions we have with our staff to develop innovative programming for our clientele. We are at a very important crossroad in the direction of care and treatment for people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS, and we want to make sure that we remain relevant to both our constituents and our funders.

The level of creativity and sophistication of BAS staff, as well as their dedication to our mission, is a constant source of pride and joy and helps me stay focused and optimistic about our future.

What are some challenges you face addressing HIV/AIDS in the Bronx?

Unfortunately, homophobia and HIV/AIDS stigma and discrimination are alive and well in the Bronx. These continue to be significant barriers in identifying those infected at an earlier stage and bringing them to care, as well as preventing the spread of infection in high-risk segments of the population, i.e. young gay men of color.

Together with the New York City Department of Health, we are engaged in campaigns to routinize HIV testing, and we were the first to develop a campaign to identify LGBTQ-friendly providers in the Bronx designed to increase access to prevention, care and treatment for this population, but there is still a lot of work to be done in this area.

The Bronx is also one of the most poverty stricken areas in the nation (according to the latest Census figures, approximately one third of the Bronx population lives below the poverty threshold) and prominently multi-ethnic and multicultural, hence requiring varied and multifaceted approaches to prevention and treatment.

Finally, while not unique to the Bronx, the country’s economic downturn coupled with a shift in the approach to treat the epidemic is creating significant difficulties in funding the work that we do.

How do these challenges affect how you provide services to your clients?

In the past two years, we have suffered significant budget reductions that have forced us to become “leaner and meaner” infrastructure-wise and to maximize resources to maintain our service delivery. While some of the measures we’ve had to take are painful and difficult, I think we have become stronger and better in the process.

Most significant, we have been able to maintain the most important programming for our clients without any major reduction in services. At the same time, we also realize that diversification of our funding and expansion of our treatment, care and prevention approaches are essential to our future existence, and we are actively engaged in strategic discussions to pursue these goals.

How has the community responded to the programs and services at BAS?

BAS is seen as the beacon of hope for people affected by HIV/AIDS in the Bronx. We are well respected by elected officials, community leaders and service providers and recognized as a

resource to the overall community.

On a daily basis we receive requests from schools to do HIV education prevention and bring our Youth Theatre troupe to perform. And community and faith organizations [ask us] to participate in health and street fairs with our mobile testing van.

We are as well recognized nationally as an innovative leader in prevention and treatment approaches in HIV/AIDS. These strategies are only possible due to the immense creativity and commitment of our staff and involvement from the clients we serve.

What future programs will BAS offer for HIV awareness and prevention?

We want to continue being supportive to those newly infected, ensuring that all the care and services they require are in place. We also want to empower those that have been living with the disease and have become medically stable to rebuild their lives and achieve any personal goals they may set for themselves.

HIV awareness and prevention will continue to be a stalwart in our programming, but we plan to achieve this goal in many nontraditional ways.

Look for our revised mission and new program approaches in our re-designed website soon.

Visit the BAS website at basnyc.org for more information.

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