

# prison health news

*-better health care while you are in and when you get out-*

Issue 4, August 2004

## Who We Are...

We are on the outside, but we were inside before. We've been where you are now and know what it's like...and survived it. We are ex-offenders talking about health issues and trying to bring about a positive change for all people who are in prison now or ever have been in the past. This newsletter is about all of us.

We will be talking about health issues. For example, what is good nutrition? Where can you get services and information on the outside? We want to take your health questions seriously and break down complicated health information so that it is understandable.

We're also here to help you learn how to get better health care within your facility and how to get answers to your health questions. Don't get frustrated. Be persistent. In prison, it's often hard to get what you want, but with health information, it doesn't have to be impossible. Join us in our fight for our right to health care and health information.

## Read on...

From,  
John, Waheedah, Patricia, Brian,  
Jaci, & Sam



*I Will Wait*, by Vincent Abner Sr,  
Books Through Bars, Contexts Collection

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# Memphis CIT Model Saves

By Susan Rogers

A growing number of cities and communities across the country have adopted the Memphis, Tennessee Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Model, an innovative, evidence-based program designed to prevent tragedies resulting from encounters between police and people whose mental illnesses may make them appear threatening. Another goal is to divert these individuals from the criminal justice system into mental health services.

## It works.

A study by Amnesty International has noted that “the Memphis Plan has resulted in reductions in the use of deadly force and in injuries sustained by officers and civilians, as well as reductions in the use of restraints.”



## Who uses the Memphis Model?

The Memphis CIT Model has been adopted by dozens of cities, including Albuquerque, New Mexico; Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; Waterloo, Iowa; Montgomery County, Maryland; and Houston, Texas.

## How Does CIT Work?

Key components of the model are:

- \* The creation of an elite squad of officers, who volunteer and then are selected for qualities including maturity and judgment;
- \* 40 hours of training, including training in communication skills and de-escalation techniques;
- \* The establishment of partnerships of police, family members, mental health consumers, and providers;
- \* 24/7 coverage of the city or community for calls involving a person in a mental health crisis.

When a call involving someone with a mental illness is received, a member of the CIT is dispatched to the scene. As soon as that officer arrives, he or she is in charge, even if outranked by other officers at the scene.

## Community Ownership

In a recently published article, Major Sam Cochran, the Memphis CIT coordinator, wrote: “What makes the CIT so successful? As I have said often, it’s more than just training! Although the 40-hour training is substantial, what really makes the CIT effective is its foundation of sensitivity and understanding interwoven within the framework of community partnerships. This gives birth to community ownership, which is the CIT heartbeat.”

# Getting Out Alive

-Excerpt from POZ,  
April 2004

## Fighting for Treatment and Care: *How to get the best care you can*

### Work the System

Get someone to explain your facility's request-and-grievance process, then follow it precisely. "If you have several (health) items, choose one," said Philadelphia FIGHT's John Bell, "and get that resolved" before tackling the next. If appealing a refusal, attach government treatment guidelines.

### Stay Polite Yet Persistent

"I've asked (male) inmates to use the charm they once used with females," Bell says. If necessary, take complaints up the chain of command, or get outside help.

### Keep Your Own Records

Prison officials often withhold records, misplace them, or won't forward them to your next doc—but you should try to get them anyway. Also, record every detail in your own health journal. Make regular copies—by hand if necessary—and mail them to an outsider. If you haven't disclosed your health status, use code in case of a shakedown or search.

### Know Your Correctional Officers

The COs often decide if you're even allowed to visit the infirmary. Feel out who's gonna support you and who's not. A big no-no? Attitude. ~POZ

# Survivors

(dedicated to the living)

By REXXX, ex-offender

In our desire, zest and zeal for life we've come upon this dismal strife. Trespassed and violated the invader seeks to slowly steal away our life. With this dismal curse we dare not say for fear of driving everyone away. We manage to cope with grace and hope and ask for the courage to make it through another day.

So many never make it home, slowly shrinking to the bone, surrendering with each heart-wrenching moan. They fall to the wayside in a race with death for a cure unknown. It cuts so close that tears fill our eyes. We feel their cries!!! We see ourselves in the fading souls in their faraway eyes.

We carry on thankful to survive, seeking some way to get on with our lives. With determination we strive to make it until an answer arrives. An answer that is final



and does not need to be nursed, a solution to this dreadful curse. Grateful though we are for the battle to have come this far, we look for the day when this nightmare is far away and our dreams can shine again as bright as distant stars. ~R

Envelope, by Brother Ray,  
Books Through Bars, Contexts Collection

# Think About It...

by John Bell, ex-offender, and Laura McTighe

We teach a class for brothers and sisters with HIV that are just getting out of jail and prison. The class is primarily about dealing with life on the outside. But we also spend a lot of time talking about the pain people suffered while locked up—especially how frequently people had to choose between getting the care they needed for their health and keeping quiet so that no one in their facility would find out their HIV status.

We are writing this article for those of *you* who are dealing with this issue on the inside now. We do not have answers for you, but there are some things that we want you to know.

## It's Your Call.

There is no protocol and no correct stance on sharing your health status in jail. **It is up to you.** In prison, being able to make decisions about when, how and to whom you disclose your status is hard if not impossible. Pretty much anything you can do to take care of yourself breaks your confidentiality as a person living with HIV.

Once people know your status in your facility, there is no getting away from the *looks*, the *stares*, the *comments* like “HIV bitch” or “He’s got that hot shit.” Before you think about getting medical care or telling anyone your status, you need to be able to say, “If you have a problem with me being HIV positive, I sincerely hope you get over it” ...*and mean it.*

## Accepting It.

People living with HIV have seen a lot of people pass before them—neighbors that dropped off with-

out a trace, friends they watched get sick, family members they cared for at the end stages.

We know that these memories weigh heavily on you—that every time you think about those people who passed on before you, you feel terrified about your own health, about when you will get sick. And, at the same time, it is these memories and this *same* fear that make you think about reaching out for help and for medical care.

## Your Body.

You have probably heard that HIV weakens the immune system so your body cannot fight off infections on its own. But have you heard that your immune system is very strong, and for a long time it wins out against HIV? On average, it takes 10 years before HIV can run through your immune system enough for you to even start feeling symptoms. And if you take care of yourself, you can make that time even longer.

## If You Get Sick.

The most important things you can do are to **1. know your body** and **2. keep an eye out for changes in your health.** *Things to watch for:* herpes blisters and cold sores that do not go away, thrush that makes your mouth and throat dry and whitish, or pneumonia that makes you really tired and short of breath. Women should also watch for repeated yeast infections.

There are meds you can take to fight off infections like these, and there are also anti-HIV meds you can take to knock out HIV, so your immune system can get strong again and fight off

infections on its own. You should be able to get these meds at your facility.

### **Confidentiality.**

But in prison, it is rarely possible to just go to the clinic, get your meds and keep your health status private. If you go to the medical staff about your HIV, *9 times out of 10 someone else is going to find out.* A correctional officer might overhear you talking with the doctor, or there might be a scheduled clinic time for the infectious disease doctor at your facility so all inmates know that is the day for people with HIV, or other inmates might see or hear the meds you take in med lines. Whatever the case, *no facility protects your confidentiality 100%.*

### **The Choice.**

Whether you decide to seek medical care or refuse it, *your life is on the line—from the HIV or from the discrimination you face in your facility.* This is *not an easy or fair choice.*

There are many people in prison who have stood up to the abuse that people with HIV face, and are getting medical care. We applaud you for your bravery, and know that you have served as inspirations for people in your facilities who are not open about their HIV.

But there are many more people getting sick behind bars, because they have refused treatment. We stand along side you and offer our support in dealing with this difficult decision.

### **Your Safety.**

Whatever decision you make, please keep yourself safe on the inside. You are too *valuable*, and there is too much work for you to do when you get out.

If you are too afraid to tell people your health status, *don't.* If you are afraid to get medical care because others will find out your status, *don't.* If you are going to seek medical care, *make sure you have someone you can lean on for support—even if it is someone you write to on the outside.* If you are going to seek medical care only if you get sick, *start preparing now.* It will be even harder to deal with the mental and emotional pain from stigma if your body is also weak.

### **Health Without Meds.**

If you choose to not get medical care while you are locked up, *take steps to keep yourself healthy.*

Bottom line: if germs cannot get inside your body, they cannot make you sick. Shower regularly, wash your hands before you eat, and keep cuts and scrapes clean.

Also, *exercise* and *stress reduction* help to keep your immune system strong. Doing push-up, sit-ups and playing sports will all strengthen your body, plus exercise helps you let out tension. And, while *it is hard to really get rid of stress on the inside*, if you can find five minutes each day to slow down and take some deep breaths, you will feel the difference.

### **We Are Here.**

We are waiting for you on the outside. There are advocates across the country who will make sure that you get the services that you need, and that you have a community of people who are HIV positive and recently released to help support you. **You are not alone.** ~JB&LM

# Dear Waheedah

By Waheedah Shabazz-El, ex-offender

Every other month our resident advice columnist will select a question and answer it here. She will look for commonly asked questions.

**To send a question, write to:**  
**Prison Health News, "Dear Waheedah"**  
c/o Philadelphia FIGHT  
1233 Locust Street, 5th Floor  
Philadelphia PA 19107

Dear Waheedah,

*I will be released from prison to Philadelphia after finishing my maximum bid. I am HIV positive. Upon release I will be homeless and broke. Being homeless again and not having the medication I need is my biggest worry upon release. What can I do?*

*Sincerely,  
Anxious in Pennsylvania*

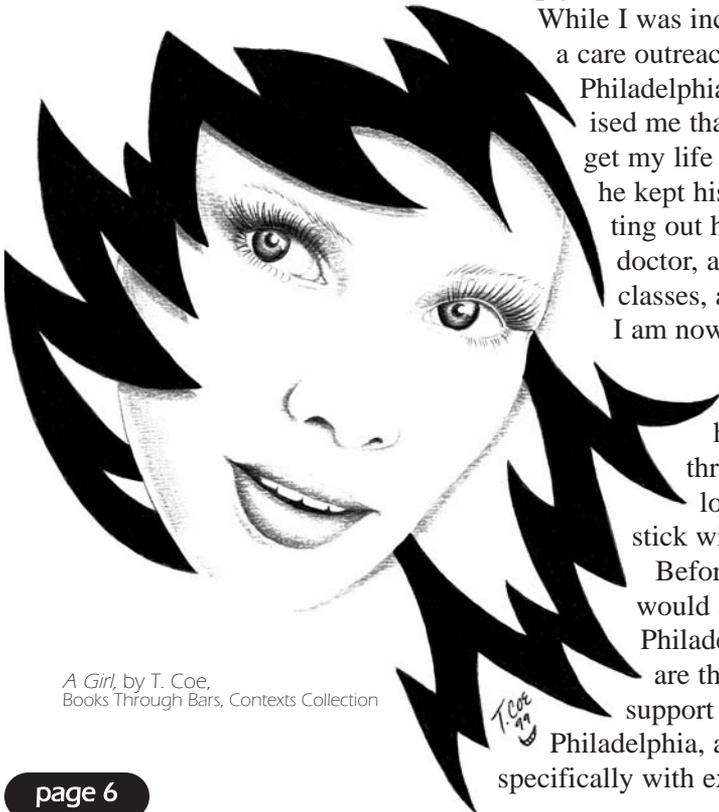
Dear Anxious,

First I would like to applaud you for seeking assistance before your release. That shows responsibility, and is a testament to the quality of person you are. I myself am HIV positive, and was diagnosed during my own incarceration, so I can certainly relate to your situation.

**There are a lot of resources here to help you.**

While I was incarcerated I met with a care outreach worker at Philadelphia FIGHT who promised me that he would help me get my life back on track. And he kept his word. Upon getting out he set me up with a doctor, a case manager, classes, and volunteer work. I am now working as a peer educator at recovery houses and halfway houses throughout the city. A lot is possible if you stick with it.

Before you get out, I would suggest contacting Philadelphia FIGHT. They are the largest AIDS/HIV support organization in Philadelphia, and they work specifically with ex-offenders.



*A Girl*, by T. Coe,  
Books Through Bars, Contexts Collection

## 1. Medications

Getting your HIV medication should not be a problem. Philadelphia FIGHT has their own clinic, the Jonathan Lax Center at 1233 Locust Street, 5th Floor. The Jonathan Lax Center, they will set you up with a doctor and medications even if you do not have insurance.

## 2. Substance Abuse & Mental Health

Do you need treatment for substance abuse and/or mental health issues? Do you have any other health problems, such as Hep-C, diabetes, high blood pressure, neuropathy, etc.? Your case manager can help you get all of these services. I encourage you to think about all the support you might need, so that everything is ready and waiting for you when you come home.

## 3. Benefits

All ex-offenders in PA are entitled to welfare, and your case manager can help you start that process. *Please be willing to follow instructions during the process.* You will have to do a lot of running around to get all your paperwork together, so ask for help when you need it.

## 4. Personal Information

In order to begin the process, your advocates on the outside will need certain information from you, like your social security #, birth date, and age. Make sure to send this information when you request assistance.

Again, I want to applaud you for planning ahead. And know that you are not alone. When you get out, please stay in touch so we can make sure you get the services you need.

May your journey be blessed,  
Waheedah Shabazz-El

~WS

# write an article!

We have gotten lots of requests for articles already, and we know that everyone who reads this newsletter will have questions or his or her own story to tell.

If you have advice for other prisoners dealing with health issues, write to us. We will feature you in "Words to Live By."

If you have a question, write to us. We will write you back and may publish an article on your question in *Prison Health News*.

If you want to write an article on something you think is important for prisoners' health, send it and we will consider publishing it in *Prison Health News*. You can also write us first to discuss ideas for articles.

*If you want your name kept confidential, you can sign your article with your first name or "anonymous."*

In coming issues, we will cover:

- \* Nutrition,
- \* Exercise,
- \* Getting Support While You Are Incarcerated,
- \* How to Advocate for Yourself,
- \* HIV Treatments,
- \* Hepatitis C Treatments,
- \* Treatment strategies for HIV and hepatitis C Co-infection,
- \* Depression,
- \* Getting Out,
- \* Staying Clean When You Get Out,
- \* Welfare, Food Stamps, and Medical Assistance,
- \* Housing,
- and much more!*

# resources for people in prison

If you need help while you are in, or when you get out, contact:

## In Philadelphia, PA

**Philadelphia FIGHT**  
1233 Locust Street, 5th Floor  
Philadelphia PA 19107  
(215) 985-4448—no collect calls  
Contact: Laura McTighe

## In New York City, NY

**Women Prison Association  
& Home Inc.**  
175 Remsen Street, 9th Floor  
Brooklyn, NY 11201  
(718) 797-0300—for collect calls from  
New York Jails/Prisons  
(718) 637-6818—no collect calls  
Contact: Leah Bundy

## In Miami, FL

**Care Resource, Miami**  
225 N.E. 34th Street  
Miami, FL 33137  
(305) 573-5411—no collect calls  
Contact: Pedro Torres

## In San Francisco, CA

**Continuum Springboard**  
225 Golden Gate Avenue  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
(415) 823-0414 —no collect calls  
(415) 823-0415—no collect calls  
Contact: Helen Lin or  
Charlie Wilson

## In Houston, TX

**Houston Montrose Clinic**  
215 Westheimer  
Houston, TX 77006  
(713) 830-3000—no collect calls  
Contact: Chris Jimmerson

*Every organization on this list provides case management, medical care and support services for people when they get out of prison. Most of these organizations specialize in care for people with HIV. Every organization distributes Prison Health News.*

If you need resources in a city not listed here, **write to us!**

We will help you track down answers to your specific questions.

**Write to us** if you know a great organization that is missing from this list.

If you need information while you are in, contact:

## Project Inform

Outreach and Education Department  
205 13th Street, Suite 2001  
San Francisco, CA 94103-2461  
information & newsletters on HIV  
\*free to prisoners

## Fortune News

Subscriptions  
c/o The Fortune Society  
53 West 23rd Street  
New York, NY 10010  
newsletter on criminal justice issues  
\*free to prisoners

## National HCV Prison Coalition

Hepatitis C Awareness Project  
PO Box 41803  
Eugene, OR 97404  
newsletter & information on hepatitis C  
\*free to prisoners

## Prison Legal News

2400 NW 80th St. #148  
Seattle, WA 98117  
newsletter on prisoner rights & court rulings  
\*sample issue \$1. unused stamps OK.

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