

Forty Years Later

On this anniversary of the first report of HIV/AIDS, Boston Living Center is still giving long-term survivors strong support

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the first diagnosis of AIDS. The epidemic ravaged a generation, claiming the many bright, promising lives of those who were unforgivably abandoned by political leaders, religious communities and even friends and family.

Since its grassroots founding in 1988, though, the Boston Living Center, now part of Victory Programs, has been a powerful, bright-shining beacon of love, support and whole-person care for those living with—no longer dying from—HIV/AIDS. It's no wonder, then, that today the vast majority of BLC members represent a sort of Greatest Generation of AIDS survivors—those who endured and fought some of the earliest, hardest and most important battles in a still-ongoing war.

All in all, about 40 percent of BLC members are in their fifties, 33 percent are in their sixties and six percent are 70 or older, according to program director Bill Lottero. Although Lottero joined the BLC just a month before COVID caused an earthquake across public health and social service organizations, giving him little time to get his bearings, he nonetheless knew exactly how to care for long-term AIDS survivors. After all, Lottero is one of them. He has been living with HIV since the late '80s, sought the services of the BLC himself early on and is a veteran organizer and alum of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's HIV/AIDS bureau.

"In the United States, 51 percent of all long-term AIDS survivors are over the age of 50," Lottero explains. "They survived a



BLC Program Director Bill Lottero

plague in which they got very, very sick—then they got well, because of the protease inhibitors that came along in 1996. But they got really whacked. They might have lost their partner, which is such a great loss. They lost their livelihoods. They

went on disability, a fixed income. That's really tough. Your whole life gets dialed down into a very small world."

"It's a social death, and there's a lot of depression from isolation," continues Lottero, who points to higher rates of suicide for survivors over 60. "This place has been open for all these years helping people to not be isolated. Although a lot of them don't want a support group anymore—they just want to have a healthy meal and come together. And on a fixed income, having those meals really stretches your monthly budget."

Lottero is rightfully proud that under his leadership, the BLC never closed its doors during COVID-19. While there were necessary changes to available services along the way, the center on Boston's South End-Back Bay borderline was always there to offer the hot, healthful meals—as well as the connections to other services related to housing, recovery and more—*that so many members depend on.*

Of course, all of this had to happen while helping members navigate the triggering experience of enduring another pandemic. The era of social distancing brought back

a lot of difficult memories for members, Lottero says.

Evolution of care

Besides simply being there for emotional support, the BLC has continued to evolve its care to meet the changing needs of all those primarily long-term survivors. Resume workshops helped find new employment for members who lost their jobs during the pandemic. BLC was quick to access vaccinations for members, and Lottero estimates that close to 90 per cent rolled up their sleeves. Also during COVID, the center started test-driving a new "pantry program," Lottero says, supplementing members' weekday lunches with bags of fresh groceries to take home on weekends and prepare using the skills gleaned in the BLC's cooking classes.

In the meanwhile, Boston Living Center continues to forge innovative partnerships that provide vital care for members. *For instance, the BLC now works with internists from Tufts dental school to provide members with one-on-one oral health assessments and more.* Lottero recalls one long-term survivor who lost his dentures while experiencing a health

event, and was unable to get a replacement through Medicaid. Lottero worked with Tufts to get the man fitted for a replacement pronto.

More than anything, though, the BLC is a kind of clubhouse providing a continuum of care at every age of life. And for long-term survivors, in particular, the center is a haven—a place full of people who understand the unique experience of feeling "that your life was truncated" decades ago, Lottero says.

"Imagine having a life plan and it gets totally wiped out," he says. "You don't have a career. You're based on a fixed income and dealing with your health half the time, so you can't ever get out of that. People don't want to hire you, and then you become stale—you don't have the job skills. That depression of all that really impacts a lot of long-term survivors. You become fearful. You become closed-in. Your world gets really small."

"We're trying to not let their world get too small," Lottero says. "It can be large. It can have community." [x]

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