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Comforting the afflicted At almost 1, AIDS Services house is gaining momentum

Jake Berry
Sentinel Staff

With tattered walls and aging floors, the Cleve Jones Wellness House in Gilsum hardly resembles a medical center. But even without the examining tables and doctors equipment, the house, which currently serves as home to three clients living with HIV or AIDS, delivers the most important remedy, residents said. It provides a sense of comfort. Run by AIDS Services for the Monadnock Region, the wellness house will celebrate its first anniversary in Gilsum on July 31.



AIDS Services for the Monadnock Region
Executive Director Susan MacNeil relaxes at the
Cleve Jones Wellness House in Gilsum.

"I'm happy here," said Mark E. Parsons, a house resident living with AIDS who moved to the house when it first opened last year. "That's something I wasn't able to say a year ago. "It sounds so simple," he said. "But being happy is a lot of work. ... This place makes it easier. ... I feel good for the first time in a long time." That sentiment, according to Susan M. MacNeil, executive director of AIDS Services, was the driving idea behind the house. It was never intended to be a medical facility, she said. Clients go to area medical facilities for their treatment. Instead, the house, which agency officials first targeted in 2004, was intended to provide comfort and stability for one of the world's most vulnerable populations, she said. "It's not just about medicine," MacNeil said of the house, which now hosts the agency offices and room for seven clients. "It's about how people create their life. "When we envisioned our program ... we believed we could create an environment that would allow people living with HIV and AIDS to be as productive as possible in their lives," she continued. "And we would do that by providing a safe and loving and welcoming home for people ... We've exceeded everything we'd hoped we'd accomplish." **A sense of community** The house is quiet during the day. The living room and dining area — complete with donated couches and chairs — are completely empty, as is the communal kitchen. The housemates, who often work during the day, or seek solitude in their bedrooms, cook and clean entirely for themselves. They don't have to interact with others much at all. But, they do. The residents often cook and eat together, said another house resident, who declined to give his name for medical privacy reasons. They share cigarettes and conversation when they're up to it, and they seek the solitude of their rooms when they're not. But, either way, they share a sense of comfort in living with people who know the pains of the

disease, he said. Outside of the house “you feel like you’re isolated,” said the resident, who has lived in the house for almost two months. “You feel like a fish out of water. ... But, being in here, it’s very understanding, very helpful, (everyone’s very) compassionate toward me. ... Personally, I’m able to deal with my illness a lot more comfortably here than I would in any other environment.” And the benefits extend beyond the social conditions, as well, house residents said. With offices on the home’s second floor, agency personnel are often available to help the house residents and to answer their questions, Parsons said. Two house managers, who live in an apartment attached to the back of the building, are on hand 24 hours a day to assist with any medical emergencies. “Any time I need something ... I can just go downstairs and all my help is right there,” Parsons said. The housing also provides a big financial boost, he said. AIDS Services charges \$500 a month rent, according to MacNeil, and a portion of that is covered by federal housing vouchers, leaving more money for the residents to enjoy life, they said. “When I was living in my own house, I could barely make ends meet,” said Parsons, who also works part-time at a local convenience store. “I had no way of paying for entertainment, stuff to get out of my own head. ... I couldn’t afford to go out to dinner. I lost my truck.” Now, he has money to go to dinner with friends, Parsons said, or to go to movies — activities to help relieve the depression that he’s suffered since being diagnosed with HIV in 1986. “Now that I’m living with other people around me, my depression is almost diminished to nothing,” Parsons said. The other resident interviewed agreed. “It’s been a big help for me as far as living life at this moment,” he said. “I’m very comfortable with who I am.”

A negotiated compromise Large wood-framed beds scatter most of the house’s seven rooms like a seaside bed-and-breakfast. But, the house feels even more like home, residents said. An old birdbath welcomes visitors from the front lawn, and a screened-in table makes for a makeshift patio in the backyard. “It’s nice,” Parsons said. “It’s very comfortable.” Each of the building’s three floors has a full bathroom, and laundry facilities — one for each of the house residents, as it works out. Though that’s about to change, according to MacNeil. Agency officials expect a fourth resident to move into the house by the end of July, she said. And they hope to have the remaining rooms filled soon after. “It’s happening slower than we expected,” MacNeil said. “But it’s happening.” Filling the house has been more difficult due to a variance to the town’s zoning ordinances that regulates the number of occupants, time for meetings and parking issues, among other things. AIDS Services and the town agreed to the ordinance, which includes 28 conditions, in January 2006 following a long — and often heated — battle between agency and town officials, in which the agency threatened to sue over discrimination after the selectmen denied the agency’s two zoning proposals. The town’s planning board and zoning board of adjustment eventually accepted the agency’s proposal, however, with the 28 conditions. The variance, though fair, MacNeil said, includes restrictions on the type of residents permitted in the house that are difficult to overcome, she said. It prohibits, for instance, the house from hosting ex-convicts — an unfortunate restriction, MacNeil said, for many HIV-positive and AIDS patients, who have struggled with drug and alcohol problems. “For people coming out of prison, this is ... a perfect environment,” she said. “It’s a controlled setting. it’s peaceful. It’s outside of the hubbub of things. But, we can’t have those people because the variance says we can’t. That’s a difficulty for us, but we’re doing the best we can with it.”

Looking ahead The home’s first birthday will be one great celebration, MacNeil said. It will be a chance to recognize all the challenges the

agency has overcome over the years, and a chance to consider where the program can grow from here. Over its first year, the agency faced challenges in the form of two complaints — both filed anonymously — about the house and its residents. Both complaints, MacNeil said, concerned one of the house's former residents who had been restricted to a wheelchair. The complainant reported the man was not receiving the appropriate medical attention, MacNeil said. Officials from the N.H. Department of Health and Human Services and the Governor's Commission on Disabilities investigated the two complaints, respectively. They found both complaints to be unfounded, MacNeil said. State officials could not comment on the investigations due to confidentiality restrictions, according to a health department spokesman. Aside from those two complaints, the program has not had any issues with the town or its residents, MacNeil said. Selectman William G. Hasbrouck declined comment for this story. Other town officials could not be reached.

"Nothing that was predicted by our most vocal nay-sayers has come true," MacNeil said. "Nor will it come true because all we've done is beautify the property and be good neighbors. And that's all we intend to do." In order to be good neighbors, the agency plans to further extend into the community in the coming year, MacNeil said. Officials hope host events and to offer classes and lectures, which will be open to the public. They also plan to form a housing advisory committee, which will include area residents, to help shape the future of the house. "We want to talk about larger issues," MacNeil said. "We want to engage in the community in a really meaningful way. "We're so happy with where we are," she continued. "There are many people who said 'oh, they're not going to last.' Now here we are a year later. ... We have this beautiful property. ... We knew that we belonged here, and now that we're here, we have no doubt that this is where we belong." Jake Berry can be reached at 352-1234, extension 1435, or jberry@keenesentinel.com.