

# HEALING THE HEALER

## Helping Addicts Helps Former Drug Addict Stay Clean



Matta Kelley  
Quality Assurance Coordinator

In retrospect, Matta Kelley feels certain that her job with the Community Outreach Intervention Projects (COIP) saved her life.

Hired in 1988 after getting clean following a 15-year drug addiction, Kelley now serves as a quality assurance coordinator for COIP, an organization based at the UIC School of Public Health, which targets drug users in neighborhoods across the Chicago area with an array of public health interventions and research studies.

Using members of targeted populations to deliver community-based services, COIP offers street outreach; prevention education addressing HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases common among impoverished and substance-abusing populations; counseling and testing for diseases; case management; syringe exchange; drug abuse counseling; and referrals to a variety of services including drug treatment. In collaboration with UIC's Community Clinic Network, COIP sites also offer medical, mental health and dental care to persons who are infected with HIV.

After kicking such a long, intense drug habit, which made her unable to raise three of her four children, Kelley says she couldn't even find a job at a fast food restaurant before being hired at COIP.

"If I hadn't been hired by COIP, I don't know what would have happened to me," she says. "I had no skills and no confidence. Without a job, I would have certainly gone back to using drugs."

While receiving treatment at a methadone clinic, Kelley says someone told her to call COIP about a job. After meeting Dr. Lawrence Ouellet, research associate professor of epidemiology at the UIC School of Public Health and director of COIP, Kelley was hired to serve as an outreach worker in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood.

"Larry said he just had a gut feeling about me," Kelley says.

Kelley began her new career at a time when a large number of COIP's clients were dying from AIDS.

"Matta and another case manager would keep funeral kits in the trunks of their cars," Ouellet says. "A lot of the time our clients didn't have a family or weren't in contact with their family, so the case workers would arrange their funerals. It really gave people comfort to know that someone would take care of them after they passed away."



Larry Ouellet, COIP Director

When antiretroviral drugs became more readily available in the mid to late 1990's, a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS was no longer a death sentence, Ouellet says.

"The (antiretroviral) drugs were like witnessing a miracle," he says. "People are alive today who were told that they only had months to live."

COIP has been providing community-level AIDS prevention education to drug users and their sexual and drug-using partners in Chicago since 1986. Through street outreach, COIP's outreach workers have the ability to access the larger population of drug users who cannot be reached through institutionally-based HIV prevention programs. The goal of COIP is to promote a range in HIV risk-reduction alternatives over the short-term, while working toward the long-term objective of fostering a drug-free lifestyle among individuals in these high risk populations.

Street outreach is conducted by trained field staff who, like Kelley, are themselves members of the population targeted for intervention. As former addicts, these outreach workers have a distinct understanding of the language, street culture, and beliefs of the target groups and are therefore trusted by active drug users.

Kelley, who was shy and insecure when she started working with COIP, soon gained confidence and self-esteem by helping people who were facing the same struggles she faced as a drug-addicted mother. She believes that one of the secrets to her success at COIP for almost 20 years is the ability to relate to her clients.

"I know the shame and guilt that a drug-addicted mother lives with," she says. "I also know that look in her child's eyes of fear and embarrassment."

Kelley says she saw that same look in the eyes of three little girls she met one winter day in 2005, while standing in front of one of COIP's five field offices.

The sidewalk was covered with wet, slushy snow on the frigid day, when Kelley saw a mother attempting to push a toddler in a stroller, while her two older children walked alongside of her. When they passed by, Kelley could see that one of the older girls was wearing flip-flops, while the other was in adult-sized rain boots with no socks.

"After that day, I just couldn't get them out of my head," Kelley says. "I lost sleep over these kids."

Kelley asked the field office staff to call her when they saw the family again. When they did, Kelley rushed over and took the children to buy their first-ever pair of new shoes.

"The kids were so excited they were hysterical," she says. "It was great that for a moment they could feel special. I know that we can't save everyone, but at least we can make life a little better for them right now."

While Kelley admits that working with drug addicts can be difficult and often frustrating, she says she knows that the work she and her colleagues are doing really does make a difference. COIP's research team published research showing that the rate of new HIV infections declined 75% among injection drug users in the neighborhoods first targeted by COIP.

"I believe that when people have a place to go where they feel good, are treated with respect and always hear a positive message, little by little a change happens," Kelley says. "I know, because that is what happened to me." ■



Outreach worker in shooting gallery

Outreach worker at "hole in the wall" shooting gallery



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