

A Special Message to Prisoners Inside:

FIGHT FOR HEPATITIS C EDUCATION AND TREATMENT IN PRISON!

At our annual retreat held at the end of June 2001, we decided to formally change our name to the HIV/Hepatitis C in Prison Committee of California Prison Focus. While we have for past several years been advocating on behalf of prisoners with hepatitis C (HCV) and those coinfecting with HIV and HCV, we felt it important to reflect this fact in our name.

The hepatitis C epidemic is one of the greatest dangers faced by people incarcerated in prisons and jails today. Large numbers of people coming into prison are already infected with HCV and, of course, due to the lack of clean needles (including those used for tattooing) and other harm reduction tools inside, there is a certainly a growing transmission rate. Prison and jail administrators, correctional medical staff, and even the Centers for Disease Control have yet to come to grips with the seriousness of this epidemic for the more than 2 million people incarcerated in this country. In fact, these agencies seem to be intentionally downplaying the significance of HCV in the prison population. In some ways, this head in the sand approach by the prison industrial complex is painfully reminiscent of the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It took hundreds of deaths, prisoner activism, costly lawsuits, militant demonstrations, and staff whistleblowing before the prison system began to at least consider the seriousness of the AIDS epidemic. Here we are at the beginning of a larger, and

perhaps more insidious epidemic, and no one is coming up with real solutions for education, care and treatment.

We have over the past several years, witnessed the deaths of many prisoners coinfecting with HIV and hepatitis C (and it comes as no surprise that at least 80% of prisoners with HIV are also infected with hepatitis C). We know that all of you have witnessed similar deaths – it is inevitable because the rate of HCV in California's prisons is officially recognized as 45% of all men prisoners and 55% of all women prisoners. And unofficially, due to the history of injection drug use by people incarcerated, we estimate that at least 75% of the prison population probably has hepatitis C.

The HIP Committee believes that prisoners and jail detainees must have access to comprehensive, understandable and culturally appropriate HCV educational information. The prison system should be falling over itself trying to set up prisoner-led HCV peer education programs (along the lines of HIV peer education programs) or at the very least incorporating HCV education into existing programs. Unfortunately, it is not and most prisoners have little access to any educational material.

We learned during the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that testing without access to treatment was like a death sentence. The HIP Committee strongly opposes any mandatory testing for HCV.

We support the availability of free, confidential and voluntary hepatitis C testing as part of a comprehensive HCV education, diagnostic and treatment program. Many prisoners are now finding out that they tested positive for HCV five or ten years ago. They were never informed of their test results, they were never given liver panels or monitored for cirrhosis of the liver. Testing should be the first step of a comprehensive treatment plan. Prisoners must have access to liver biopsies and the current standard of treatment for HCV that is being offered people on the street, including access to combination therapy with pegylated or the newly approved Pegasys interferon. There must not be a double standard for the treatment of the incarcerated.

Additionally, prisons and jails could save thousands of dollars in emergency medical bills if they provided three

balanced nutritious meals each day, including daily access to fresh fruit and vegetables and offered special diets for people who have HCV and other serious illnesses.

These are only some of the issues faced by prisoners with HCV. We have an uphill battle to fight for care and treatment over the next few years. We provide HCV educational materials upon request. You can write to us at: HIP Committee, California Prison Focus, 2940 16th Street, Suite 307, San Francisco, CA 94103.

We would very much like to hear from people inside who are fighting for HCV treatment and similar issues. Your voice is the most important one as we fight for justice and better care for people living behind the walls with HIV and hepatitis C.

We list below two excellent newsletters about HCV. Sample copies (and in some case subscriptions) are sent free to prisoners. However, if you have any extra stamps and can send them along, please do so.

**Hepatitis C Awareness News
P.O. Box 41803
Eugene, OR 97404**

**HCV Advocate
P.O. Box 427037
San Francisco, CA 94142**

**Flyer issued by:
HIV/Hepatitis C in Prison Committee
California Prison Focus
2940 16th Street, #307
San Francisco, CA 94703
Voicemail/fax: (510) 665-1935
Website: www.prisons.org.hivin.htm**