

## LINKING HIV AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION WORKS FOR WOMEN

Since the onset of the HIV epidemic, injection drug use (IDU) has played a significant role in the transmission of the virus. Women have been especially hard hit by IDU-related HIV transmission. Injection drug use directly and indirectly accounts for over 47 percent of all reported AIDS cases among Minnesotan women, compared with 14.6 percent of all AIDS cases among men.

Why are women at such risk of IDU-related HIV infection?

To answer this question, we spoke with Sue Purchase, one of the founders of Women With a Point (WAP), an organization dedicated to providing HIV/AIDS prevention education and intervention services utilizing harm reduction principles to injection drug users and their sex partners. Once an injection drug user, Sue has been a dedicated advocate on behalf of the IDU community for many years.

Women, explains Sue, are uniquely vulnerable to IDU-related HIV infection. Aside from the fact that women are injection drug users themselves, they are also the wives, girlfriends and sexual partners of injection drug users. In fact, HIV transmission through sexual activity with an injection drug user accounts for almost a quarter of the accumulated cases of AIDS among Minnesota women.

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Socio-economic issues also play a significant role in women's exposure to HIV. For some women, trading sex for money, food, shelter or drugs is not only a reality but a necessity. Negotiating safer sex options under these conditions is often not possible. In addition, poverty and abuse place women in a difficult position to take control of their health and well being.

Sue Purchase and Toni St. Pierre founded Women With a Point in 1996 to help women overcome these obstacles. Operating out of Sue's car, WAP became the first woman-run needle exchange and HIV prevention education program in the Twin Cities. WAP's guiding principals are based on the harm reduction model, the goal being to help IDUs reduce the harm to themselves and their partners caused by their alcohol and drug use. Among the principles of harm reduction is the belief that HIV takes priority over drug problems. Drug use is described on a continuum and for many is a fact of life. Therefore, IDUs deserve to be treated with respect and acceptance, and abstinence from drugs should not be the only goal of providing intervention services.

Since those early days, Women With a Point has expanded its services, and in April 1999 opened its first storefront location at 11 West 15th Street in Minneapolis. Today, Women With a Point provides a wide range of harm reduction services including needle exchange, HIV prevention education, safer sex and safer drug-using workshops, user support groups, case management and direct client referral services to over three thousand injection drug users and their sexual partners.

"We serve drug users," explains Sue; "whatever it takes to stem the tide of injection drug use and IDU HIV-related infections, we are ready, willing and able to offer our services." Sue's program shows that linking HIV and substance abuse prevention and intervention services is not only possible, but it works.