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Local News

23rd Annual AIDS Walk Coming On Sunday Morning!

By Dennis McMillan

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The 23rd annual AIDS Walk San Francisco will once again bring together people from all walks of life for a common cause in the battle against AIDS and to support people with HIV/AIDS and other life-threatening diseases. Neither an economic recession nor the threat of bad weather will prevent thousands of Bay Area residents from participating on Sunday, July 19 in the 6.2 mile walk through Golden Gate Park to raise critically needed funds to support the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and dozens of other Bay Area HIV/AIDS service organizations. The San Francisco AIDS Foundation (SFAF) provides leadership to prevent new HIV infections. Linking community experience with science, the Foundation develops groundbreaking prevention programs and bold policy initiatives to promote health and create sustainable progress against HIV. Established in 1982, SFAF refuses to accept that HIV transmission is inevitable.



Actor Hall sparks from Queer as Folk with comic writer Bruce Vilanch at the 2006 AIDS WALK in Golden Gate Park.

"It's a pivotal year in our struggle against AIDS," said Mark Cloutier, SFAF CEO. "We are facing a greater demand for services at a time when fewer resources are available. Because we don't want to turn clients away and are committed to reducing the number of new HIV infections in San Francisco by 50 percent by the year 2015, the economic downturn will not weaken our resolve."

The Foundation is playing an integral role in negotiations with legislators and the governor on a budget compromise that would avoid drastic reductions in funding to HIV prevention, education, and care.

An estimated 25,000 will participate in the walkathon that begins at 10:30 a.m. (with a 9:45 a.m. Opening Ceremony) in Sharon Meadow in Golden Gate Park. In addition to raising millions of dollars for grassroots services and advocacy work, the AIDS Walk also aims to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS.

"AIDS Walk San Francisco is not only a fundraiser, but also a community-building event," said Craig Miller, founder and producer of AIDS Walk San Francisco (AWSF). "Each year, the AIDS Walk brings together tens of thousands of committed people, including elected officials, civic-minded leaders, community organizations, and entertainment luminaries who demand that HIV and AIDS must remain an urgent priority."

"The good news is that money raised by AIDS Walk San Francisco provides unrestricted funding for the cutting-edge services and advocacy work that help us prevent new HIV infections and improve the lives of those living with this disease," said Cloutier. "During difficult times like these, people want to come together to make a difference for the most vulnerable among us."

Over the last several months, SFAF has rallied the community – including physicians, social

service providers, people living with HIV/AIDS, and peer organizations all over California – to fight proposed budget cuts that would jeopardize lives and compromise the future health of thousands of Californians. A June 10 rally drew hundreds of supporters to the steps of the State Capitol.

"AIDS Emergency Fund (AEF) has been selected by SFAF as a community partner for AWSF. This means that new walkers and staff and board of AEF who solicit pledges for AIDS Walk can have the funds designated for direct support of AEF. With this new fundraising incentive, AEF is fielding its largest Walk team in several years, with more than 30 walkers already signed up and more than \$20,000 secured in pledges.

"We are grateful to the AIDS Foundation for creating this novel way for smaller agencies to raise funds through AIDS Walk," Mike Smith, executive director of AEF told Bay Times.

Only pledges or donation via new walkers on AEF's team or current board and staff count toward AEF. Because AEF's team has some returning walkers, a portion of the team total will still benefit the AIDS Foundation. "We are glad to do our part to help the AIDS Foundation as well," said Smith. "We are all in this together and many of our clients access services at both agencies."

"Seeing almost 30,000 people in Sharon Meadow all committed to helping in the fight against HIV/AIDS is moving enough, but when you remember that each walker you see also represents many other people who sponsored and supported them in their fundraising, the numbers increase exponentially, and become overwhelmingly powerful," Joanie Juster, development manager/volunteer coordinator for AEF/ BCEF (Breast Cancer Emergency Fund) told Bay Times. "And that is when the sheer goodness of people moves me to tears."

Similar to AEF, BCEF provides emergency financial assistance for low income clients, but for those women and men disabled by breast cancer. A grant of \$500 helps one client for one year. "It's really important during these challenging economic times to remember that not everyone has a job or medical insurance, and there are lots of clients in need; so we need every penny coming from the Walk," said BCEF Board President Cynthia Hester. "Every little bit helps and goes directly to the client," she added. She said they pride themselves in having low overhead in terms of a small staff and "a sea of volunteers that we are very appreciative of to help us in client services, fundraising, and distributing money to clients."

Since 1987, AWSF has raised more than \$70 million for HIV/AIDS programs and services in the Bay Area and has become Northern California's largest AIDS fundraising event. Last year alone, 25,000 walkers raised a near-record \$4.5 million for SFAF and more than 50 other Bay Area AIDS service organizations.

This year, AWSF benefits SFAF and 63 other HIV/AIDS organizations serving six Bay Area counties. Special Guests who will speak at the Opening Ceremony include Dan Ashley (ABC-7), Fernando and Greg (Energy 92.7), Tim'm T. West (poet, lyricist, and activist), and Mark Cloutier, SFAF CEO. Special musical performances will include Julie Garnye (The Late Night Revue, Cats, Hair: In Concert) performing Rodgers & Hammerstein's inspirational "You'll Never Walk Alone;" HIJK, Native Elements, and Tim'm. Elected officials expected to attend include: SF Supervisors Bevan Duffy, Tony Campos, Sean Elsbernd; Santa Clara Supervisor Liz Kniss; SF Treasurer Jose Cisneros and State Assemblymember Noreen Evans.

To register for the Walk, visit aidswalk.net or call (415) 615-9255.