

CalHEP Member Profile: Sami Rhodes, Program Services/ Education-Outreach Coordinator at Sierra Hope

1) What made you decide to work on viral hepatitis issues?

The demand to work on hepatitis issues presented itself from people who were diagnosed with hepatitis C and their family members. We started to receive a significant amount of requests in 2001. The individuals called Sierra Hope for support because they or a family member had been diagnosed with hepatitis C, but that is all they were told. They walked out of the doctor's office still having no idea what hepatitis C was and really needed guidance. Up to 2001, Sierra HOPE services focused on clients who were infected with HIV. Although we were aware that some clients were co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C, services were specific to HIV. After we started receiving calls for hepatitis C guidance/assistance, we started looking at the hepatitis C factors that affected clients. In 2003 there was a gentleman who frequently called the center to ask for support. The persistence of this individual inspired Sierra Hope to create a support group. Five individuals attended the first support group meeting and 14 attended the second meeting. People have demonstrated a positive attitude toward this group.

2) What are 1-2 successes you've had working on viral hepatitis?

1) One advantage of being located in a rural county is that there is a community interest specific to hepatitis C. Everyone knows someone who is infected. This community interest is the base of services we provide because all of our hepatitis C services are funded by public donations. The organization offers support groups, free hepatitis testing and materials.

2) The second success is that there is an influx of requests for hepatitis C testing and informational/educational presentations.

3) What's a current challenge you're facing related to your work on viral hepatitis?

Funding is the ultimate challenge. We need more funding to provide more services. All of our hepatitis services are paid for by public donations. These donations provide us with the ability to provide these services; however, it also limits the services we can offer. It is still hard when I have to say "no" to a request for services. So, recently I find myself saying "not yet" instead. We had a successful hepatitis support group in our local prison for 1.5 years. The prisoners always attended the meetings with a list of questions for me and were very appreciative of the group. This program was part of the services provided by our public donations. However, we had to make a difficult choice as to where to continue to use this limited funding, and the decision was to increase services to the general public and discontinue the prison support group. This example demonstrates both a challenge and a success story.

Time itself is a challenge because there are no dollars to pay for the time spent developing and implementing solid hepatitis C strategies.

4) Would you like to mention anything else regarding your experience in working with viral hepatitis issues?

This job allows me to work with people that come from all walks of life. Health professionals call our organization to ask for referral information on hepatitis C resources. There is much work to do ahead to meet the needs of the public. We need funding to be able to "hit the streets and do the job."