



Debra Endean

AIDS Resource Center Keeps Up the Fight

Off the Cuff with Debra Endean

BY MAC WRITT

Debra Endean, vice president and COO of the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin, has never ceased fighting for those affected with HIV/AIDS. Having started her career in research, she now helps operate Wisconsin's largest HIV health care system. On Saturday, Oct. 3, the ARCW will present the 26th annual AIDS Walk Wisconsin & 5K Run, an HIV fundraising event hosted by Lance Bass and Michael Turchin on Milwaukee's Lakefront.

MICHAEL BURMESCH

How did your career in HIV healthcare begin?

I actually started my career in research; I have a Ph.D. in genetics. But realized when I started doing research that I really wanted to be more involved with patient care. Personally, I had a lot of passion for organizations involved in community health and serving underprivileged populations. The issue of HIV/AIDS is very near and dear to my heart. I lost someone very close to me in the early '80s from AIDS. So the opportunity to work in healthcare and focus on this population was really appealing and a privilege.

Professionally, I have been involved in healthcare my whole career. Healthcare as a whole is struggling with this paradigm that we have to provide better quality as an industry and we have to do that at a lower cost point. So as a professional I feel like it is part of my job to help solve that.

What does the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin provide?

Because we are managing a chronic disease, it is about providing not only clinical services but social services as well. We provide things you would expect from a medical clinic, but right next door is our dental clinic. We provide mental health services including psychiatry, psychotherapy and substance abuse programs. We also offer case management, a food pantry, legal services, housing services. Given the populations we serve, many of these folks are living in poverty and dealing with the stigma of having HIV as well as the stigma surrounding mental health issues and sexual orientation. All of these things can interfere with a patient's ability to access and stay in care.

What is the most rewarding part of your position?

Some of our patients live with challenges that are quite daunting and I admire their courage and their resiliency. I think that is the most rewarding, to feel like we have the opportunity to play a role in that and help support individuals who are facing and dealing with this and have outcomes that really make a difference.

What is your favorite aspect of AIDS Walk Wisconsin?

It is such an amazing event and opportunity for the community to get together to show their support towards the fight against AIDS. We don't hear about it every night on the news the way we used to. It's the single most important public health issue of our time and it is still affecting people in significant ways.

The walk is also a time for people to come together and remember. They remember people they have lost and their stand against all of the stigma and the discrimination that came along with this epidemic. When you look out at the crowd it is really quite inspiring—people with HIV standing shoulder-to-shoulder with family members and community supporters.

To learn more about, take part in and/or donate to the 26th annual AIDS Walk Wisconsin & 5K Run, call 800-348-9255 or visit aidswalkwis.org. For more information on the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin, call 414-273-1991 or visit arcw.org.