



**I fought the law:** HIV unit supervising attorney Manel Kappagoda and HIV/AIDS Law Project director Jeff Selbin discuss legal strategies to help people with HIV or AIDS.

# Good advice

For 10 years, the East Bay Community Law Center has been fighting repressive laws and giving free advice to low-income people. **By Fiona Williams**

TEN YEARS AGO, Cseneca Parker was struggling with drug addiction and illness. He applied for MediCal and disability benefits but found himself battling the state bureaucracy. That was when he contacted the East Bay Community Law Center, which gave him legal advice and helped him file his claims.

"I was too ill to keep trying," Parker said. "I was 100 percent disabled. They fixed my situation and helped me get health care and disability in 15 days, when others were waiting two years."

Parker went on to volunteer at the center. "The EBCLC allowed me the opportunity to get back into work," he said. "I had been addicted to crack, and I wanted to recondition myself and prove that I could go back to work. They trained me in computers and in all the skills it takes to run an administration. It led me right into my job at

the East Bay AIDS Foundation."

This year the EBCLC celebrates 10 years of helping thousands of low-income people make their way through governmental and legal bureaucracies — as well as challenging laws that penalize the poor.

The center was founded by Boslit law students tired of the corporate law-oriented attitude they found prevalent among their peers. With \$2,000, one lawyer, and a crew of student interns, they founded the Berkeley Community Law Center (the name was changed earlier this year) to help

people who couldn't afford legal services. Now the center, staffed by eight lawyers and 15 interns, sees 300 clients every month.

"They have truly proven to be my friends," Parker said. "They took it one step beyond professional—we're part of a family. Everyone is given love and attention."

In recent years EBCLC staffers have spent much of their time helping welfare recipients through the legal maze put in place by welfare reform. "Since we have opened, laws have become more repressive and regressive," EBCLC director Bernida Reagan said. "We find that just a little bit of legal information can make a big difference in people's lives."

As I was talking with EBCLC lawyer Ed Barnes, he received a phone call from a student receiving welfare. "This is a typical call," he said. "She needs another year to complete her

training. On an individual basis [the Alameda County Social Services Agency] is harassing people to get out of school, telling them they need to get a job. The agency proposes to get everyone employed, but the plans are low on training and education—people can't find living-wage jobs."

In response the center is trying new ways to educate and advocate for low-income people. At a recent community forum, EBCLC members discussed the problems with welfare-to-work programs and the need for the center to develop a collaborative process to serve the community. "Advocacy has to be flexible and insightful," Reagan said. "We are training our law interns in a new kind of advocacy much more connected to the diverse group of human social services."

As well as welfare issues, the EBCLC works on housing issues, HIV and AIDS services, and economic de-

velopment. Recently the center moved to address the lack of banks in West Oakland, helping to form the People's Community Partnership Federal Credit Union to provide financial services for low-income people.

The EBCLC's workload has dramatically increased since the Legal Aid Society of Alameda, the East Bay's other community legal resource, closed its doors. Last month the Washington, D.C.-based Legal Service Corporation, a government agency that funds legal assistance services, defunded the Legal Aid Society; it has cut funding across the board the past three years. Reagan says the reason for that boils down to "people with money not wanting to use public money to foment social change. Those in power do not want lawyers to file class action challenges in systemic barriers and issues," she said.

EBCLC board chair Michael Lach is glad the center has never received money from the LSC, which has traditionally been the major funder of legal safety-net organizations throughout the country. "There are strings attached to that money," he told the *Bay Guardian*. "We can do policy advocacy and attempt to affect, say, county welfare-to-work regulations. If we'd been a recipient of LSC money, we couldn't do that. If we wanted to challenge laws as unconstitutional, we'd be forestalled."

Despite the financial hardship of running the center, the EBCLC has managed to survive without congressional funding—to help people like Bunny Knuckles. "I had just gotten out of jail, and no one was helping me get benefits, until I went to the EBCLC," Knuckles told the *Bay Guardian*. While the center was working to help her get benefits, the owner of Knuckles's daughter's apartment, where she was staying, lost the rent check and tried to evict. The EBCLC took the landlord to court and won.

"When people can't seem to get their benefits, [EBCLC staffers] seem to be able to do it," she said. "They care for the homeless, for people with HIV, and they're diligent." Knuckles, who is HIV-positive, now works as a peer advocate for Women Organized to Respond to Life-Threatening Diseases (WORLD).

"We need to continue to be responsive, to address what is critical to our clients," Reagan said. "In 1989 when the Oakland earthquake happened, we helped people who needed urgent housing and health care. Who knows what will happen in 1999? What we do know is that there will always be poor people." ■

Contact the East Bay Community Law Center at (510) 548-4040.