Regional AIDS Interfaith Network helps when it's needed most

By The Advertiser Staff

Nata Breaux, as a member of Ascension Episcopal Church, serves as a team leader for Regional AIDS Interfaith Network, which helps HIV/AIDS patients.

"A RAIN team consists of seven people and together we support a client referred by Lafayette Cares," Breaux said.

The client belonging to her team is still able to drive, she says, and has family in a town not far from here.

"We telephone him, take him out for meals and shopping for him," she explains. "As he gets worse, we will do more and more for him. Like that you establish a relationship. We do whatever he needs. We're a support group."

The help offered, the team leader says, also consists of emotional support — "a friend in need is a friend indeed." Families of AIDS patients often get burnt out as physical and emotional needs become more and more demanding.

"We help them out and do whatever we can for them," Breaux continued. "A RAIN team is usually formed through the churches."

There is no religious discrimination. For example, Jewish people can care for a Catholic client or a Catholic team can care for a Protestant client.

"RAIN started in New Orleans with an Episcopal Church," she said. "There are now three RAIN teams in Lafayette: Church of the Ascension Episcopal Church, Our Lady of Wisdom (the USL campus church) and Our Lady of Fatima."

Breaux's involvement with RAIN began about a year ago and a team formed a while later as she encouraged others to join. But with the social stigma attached to AIDS victims, were team members reluctant to join?

"It's something we wanted to do. We're becoming very attached to our client, our first one. We do whatever we can emotionally, practically," she explained. "...It's a little slow getting a team together. Everybody who has volunteered is happy they did. Our client has sort of drawn us together. He's really getting to be very fond of us all."

Three of the team members are registered nurses, although a registered nurse is not required. Also, there is a counselor. "They need to feel that people are non-judgmental. Everything we do should be confidential," Breaux continued. "We're fortunate to have him. He's very special. He's had a rough life and he deserves some tender, loving care. It's very rewarding for us to see somebody who's really sort of become our friend and is more relaxed. It gives us a wonderful feeling to know we can help."

The match was made last spring by Lafayette Cares, located on the corner of St. Mary and St. Landry Streets. Their client, 28, is known before his condition since 1985. He doesn't work but can drive and live by himself.

"We see that he has food, do laundry, tidy up his apartment, go visit him at the hospital," Breaux explained, "everything you would do for a dear friend."

But would that put them at risk for contracting the AIDS virus?

"People who are not educated in this particular field don't want to be around AIDS because they feel they might catch it," Breaux explained. "If you have an open sore, you put a Band-Aid on it."

Moreover, the RAIN team members must take care not to bring infectious illnesses to their clients.

"They're losing immunity," Breaux said. "The fear is of what infection you bring to an AIDS client, which is just the opposite of what many people believe."

Also on the minds of the RAIN team members are all those healthy individuals who do not take precautionary measures to minimize the risks of becoming HIV positive.

"Lafayette Cares, an HIV/AIDS service organization, serves more than 250 people a month, according to director Gene Dolese, who is resigning effective Jan. 1. Why?"

"No particular reason," he said. "I will stay involved with Lourdes and the movement to help people with HIV and AIDS. At this time, a new director has not been selected."

"Our involvement with RAIN comes through our case manager, who refers each client to a RAIN team," Dolese explained. They also conduct testing.

Through case management, Lafayette Cares refers clients to agencies that fill their needs. And with direct assistance, they help financially qualified clients with prescriptions, utilities and rent payments.

Lafayette Cares is funded through grants from the State Office of Public Health and the State Department of Health and Hospitals. The organization began in 1985 and incorporated in 1986.

"I got involved first with St. Luke's Center at Lourdes Hospital, which is a place for homeless people with AIDS," Dolese said. "There was a search for a director about a year later. I applied and got the job."

Lafayette Cares is located at 605 W. St. Mary. They are open Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Inquiries may be made by telephoning 233-2437. In addition, they do educational presentations to groups in the area.

"Not everybody needs a RAIN team," Dolese said. "Proportionally, very few need one. Not all the people we serve can benefit from one. RAIN provides a structure of support for people who wouldn't normally have that. In a lot of ways, they assist people in tasks that healthy people take for granted."