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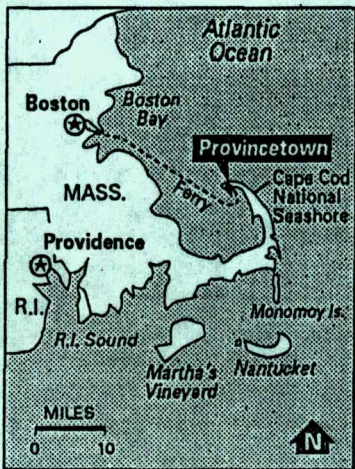
Massachusetts town embraces AIDS victims

By Steve Stecklow
Inquirer Staff Writer

PROVINCETOWN, Mass. — While throngs of summer tourists strolled past the trendy boutiques and art galleries along Commercial Street one evening last week, a decidedly more somber gathering was taking place inside a small Episcopal church just up the road.

Singing, weeping, praying and comforting one another, more than three dozen local residents and visitors participated in a "healing service" for those affected by AIDS.

All had close friends who had died of the disease. Some had it themselves. When the priest asked the audience to acknowledge aloud the people and souls it was praying for, names filled the hall for several minutes.



The Philadelphia Inquirer / RAY WHITE

AIDS has devastated this artsy Cape Cod resort community, which for decades has been a popular summer haven for homosexual men and women. At least 62 Provincetown residents have died of the disease to date, 20 in the last year alone. The local medical center is treating 136 others who have tested positive for the AIDS virus, most of them from Provincetown, whose year-round population is 3,500.

"There's a sadness," said Irene Rabinowitz, a recently elected town selectman who works at the Provincetown AIDS Support Group. "For some of us, we see ghosts on the sidewalks, the empty places where there used to be people. There are people who were a vital part of the community who are gone."

Banding together

But the tragedy has not traumatized this close-knit and accepting community. Despite the controversy that sometimes has surrounded AIDS in other locales, in Provincetown, local officials, business leaders, clergy, medical personnel and AIDS activists have joined together to confront the epidemic in an extraordinary and moving display of civic cooperation.

"We're an incredible model of what can be done when you utilize resources," said Alice Foley, the town's nurse and public health director.

Outer Cape Health Services, the town's medical facility, has dramatically expanded its AIDS treatment services, including treatment for those without insurance. Two AIDS support groups staff full-time offices here, offering such services as free daily transportation to Boston hospitals and counseling and information on alternative therapies. As part of an AIDS prevention campaign, more than 30,000 condoms have been distributed in town, and local officials recently approved the installation of condom vending machines at the public restrooms near the wharf.

AIDS quilt

Recently, a dozen panels from the AIDS Memorial Quilt — a colorful and visual reminder of the thousands of people who have died from the disease — were hung at Provincetown Town Hall. More than 2,000 people viewed the display, which listed all the local people who have died.

The healing service at St. Mary of the Harbor Episcopal Church on Tuesday evening was just one of many such religious observances. The local Roman Catholic Church sponsored an AIDS awareness conference that drew more than 150 people to the church hall. A group of Catho-

lic churchgoers has visited the homes of AIDS patients to pray with them.

"These persons deserve the ministry of the church, and it's my responsibility as the pastor of the church to respond to their needs and to administer to them in the best way that I can," said the Rev. Bento Fraga, who said he has not received any criticism from his superiors for his support of AIDS-related activities at St. Peters Church.

The local business community, despite initial concerns that AIDS could hurt tourism, has assisted the Provincetown AIDS Support Group with donations and has not tried to discourage mention of the disease. Cape Air, a small airline that flies between Provincetown and Boston, recently began soliciting \$1 contributions for the support group at its ticket gates.

"I think that the AIDS thing is a non-issue in Provincetown as far as tourism goes," said Hal Goodstein, president of the Provincetown Chamber of Commerce. "I think the kind of people who come to Provincetown like its diversity, are relatively sophisticated and come because of the mix of lifestyles."

Provincetown residents with AIDS say that the community has embraced, rather than shunned them.

"I have been treated with nothing but respect and concern," said Philippe D'Auteuil, 36, who recently stepped down as president of the gay business guild. "None of the negative things — not pity or feeling sorry for me. Positive reinforcement is all I have received from this community."

"I know it would be different somewhere else," he added.

Local AIDS service providers, while proud of their programs, worry that AIDS patients from outside Provincetown will move there to spend their last days.

"We don't encourage it under any circumstances," said Scott Penn, executive director of the medical clinic. "Rents are high. All of the cape is underemployed and underinsured. It's a tough place to live."

At the healing service last week, the congregants were asked to exchange personal stories about AIDS. A minister told of a jewelry designer he had counseled in Chicago who had gone blind before dying of the disease. Another man tearfully told of how a close friend, on his way back to Provincetown, had collapsed and died in a Cape Cod restroom.

Yet another man recounted how, over the years, many of his friends had contracted the disease. He expected he would eventually get it, too.

In January, he said, he tested positive for the AIDS virus.