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Pozhet marks 20 year milestone

Charlie Sheen's recent announcement of his HIV diagnosis has opened the dialogue about the often invisible heterosexual HIV community.

Sydney Local Health District hosts the state service for heterosexual people living with HIV, Pozhet, which held its 20th annual workshop last weekend.

"When the service first started in the 90s, it was a small peer support group which met fortnightly in Surry Hills," said Pene Manolas, the District's Manager for Community HIV Services.

"Over 20 years later, Pozhet caters for the specific needs of heterosexual HIV positive men and women and delivers its programs to more than 360 clients from across NSW."

Pozhet is accessed by a diverse group of often isolated people that may not form a specific 'community' in the same way as other HIV positive communities.

"The annual workshop is a great opportunity for heterosexual people with HIV, their families and partners across NSW to come together and meet others in a safe and confidential environment," Ms Manolas said.

For clients like Colin Smide, 53, who has been living with HIV for over 10 years, the Pozhet network has been a vital resource.

"I'm from Wollongong and sometimes it can be quite isolating.

"I've attended the annual workshop before and a number of weekend retreats. It's good to meet new people as well as catch up with those from previous Pozhet activities. I always aim to let new attendees know there are people around they can talk to and meet up with," Mr Smide said.

A father of four, Mr Smide now sees himself as an advocate for heterosexual people living with HIV and is working on a YouTube video project to educate the community on the common myths and misconceptions about HIV.

For Ms Manolas and her team, it is rewarding to see long-term clients become more open and willing to disclose their HIV status.

"Visibility and sharing knowledge of HIV as a heterosexual is invaluable to newer clients and helps decrease the stigma experienced by many who tell us they have never disclosed their HIV status to anyone," she said.

For more information about Pozhet and its services, visit pozhet.org.au.

