

## LOCAL &amp; STATE

# 'Western charity club' helps needy

## Organization assists those who don't qualify for conventional programs

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George Bush probably didn't have the Colt 45s in mind when he spoke of a "blessed point of light" during the presidential campaign, but the Houston volunteer group appears to fit the description.

The self-styled "Western charity club" is doing just what President Bush said those points of light did — provide assistance to the needy when they fall through the cracks of conventional charity and governmental programs.

The Colt 45s assist an "AIDS Trouble Fund" last year to assist people with AIDS during emergencies. The intent was to help people in a hurry by paying for food, utility bills, rent and bus passes so they can get to the doctor.

The fund also has bought Braille alarm clocks for patients who have been blinded by AIDS but need to take their dose of AZT every four hours. Sometimes the group will resolve an eviction notice by picking up the rent for a few months until AIDS patients are eligible for federal Social Security payments.

"There's nothing more frightening than what these people go through," said Walter Carter, president of the Colt 45s.

"They're going to die and then they have to worry if they're going to have a place to die in."

Members sometimes pass and savings disappear as AIDS patients wait to qualify for federal programs. For those with urgent needs, representatives of the trouble fund meet each Tuesday to study applications for assistance.

Cal Moran, chairman of the fund, said a severely ill patient may have problems filling out the forms.

"We have a very hard time with some because of dementia, and others are just in a panic," Moran said.

Once the application is submitted, a decision is made quickly and the financial assistance, food or material is delivered.

Thus far, Carter said, about \$50,000 has been distributed to needy AIDS patients by the Colt 45s. Small collection boxes in bars are the source of most of the revenues, though recently the boxes have been put in other locations and businesses have been approached to donate goods and services.

Many AIDS patients try to make it on their own until they are completely broke, Moran said. He has visited clients living in empty, dilapidated apartments with nothing in the refrigerator.

"These kids have sold everything they have to pay their own way," Moran said. "It's just flat-down heartbreaking."

Gratz takes no criticism, Carter said one man lost his job as a bartender when he became ill and finally helped with custodial duties at Carter's bar. His family had reject-



Post photo by King Chou Wong

Colt 45s president Walter Carter, left, and Cal Moran show boxes used by the organization to collect donations for AIDS victims.

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— Cal Moran,  
Colt 45s AIDS fund chairman

ed him and would not help with his bills or give him a place to stay.

"When he died, the family even refused to accept the body," said Carter.

The man had just started to receive disability payments and had enough set aside to help pay for a "funeral burial," which was arranged by the Colt 45s.

The incident is not that unusual because a portion of the group's four accounts is designated for burials. Often those who die of AIDS will recommend that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to the Trouble Fund.

The efforts of the Colt 45s do not go unnoticed among service providers to AIDS patients. Sue Cooper, a member of the advisory board of the People With AIDS Coalition of Houston, said the Colt 45s-AIDS Trouble Fund provides a needed service.

"They really come through," said Cooper. "They really care about the emergency needs of people with AIDS."

Before starting the AIDS Trouble Fund, the 13-year-old charity club donated money to the Ronald McDonald House, Multiple Sclerosis Society, the Montrose Clinic and the Montrose Counseling Center. The club's members have an affinity for country-and-western music and clothing.

Recently, other groups, including the Texas Gay AIDS Association, have started to hold fund-raising events for the Colt 45s. Carter is now campaigning to be secretary of the Texas Gay AIDS Association.

Though much of the fund raising occurs in Houston's gay community, Carter emphasized the fund is interested in helping people with AIDS regardless of their sexual preference.

"This fund is not just for gay people. It's for anyone with the debilitating disease of AIDS," Carter said.

Last week the group delivered supplies and food to five babies who were born with the human immunodeficiency virus.

"There was one little girl born a heroin addict. She still has trouble sleeping. It's unbelievable," Carter said.

Membership in the Colt 45s has increased to 23, with the members often in demand to help clients move or deliver something they need.

"We started out small and we're growing," Moran said. "But it's because the need is growing."