HIV fatherhood — safely

S.F. clinic’s process ends risk for mom and baby
By Erin Allaby

Deon was in jail when he tested positive for HIV. He knew that his long-term girlfriend was HIV-positive, and they hadn’t taken many precautions to keep him safe. So he wasn’t surprised by the diagnosis, but the news was still crushing.

“I was devastated,” said Deon, 32, a San Francisco resident who asked that his last name not be used. “I didn’t know if I was going to live. I didn’t know how I was ever going to have a family.”

Nearly five years later, Deon has a new HIV-positive baby.

Bay Bridge

Footsteps to soft opening of east span

By Michael Cabanatuan

The long, arduous and expensive task of building the new east span of the Bay Bridge is set to end with a final ceremony Thursday that includes plans for a four-mile walk, 10-kilometer and half-marathon run, a bike ride and fireworks launched from both San Francisco and Oakland.

“As opposed to opening it to cars, we’re going to open it to people,” said Randy Benedict, a spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which also serves as the toll authority.

The $6.3 billion new span will open to cars, trucks and motorcycles on Sept. 3, the day after Labor Day, bridge officials said Wednesday. But people will get to walk, run and bike across the bridge, and possibly hear a bridge song.

“Bay Bridge continues on A11”
Despite HIV, he can be a dad — Safely

FROM THE COVER

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Donna's announcement, however, is a direct challenge to Congress, which banned any switch to five-day-a-week delivery in its continuing budget resolution, which expires March 27. But Postal Service attorneys believe the agency has the authority to make changes necessary for its “incidental” revenue, the postmaster general said.

Since 1806, the Postal Service has been an independent agency with no govern- mental funding. But with Congress still setting the rules, there has been a long-running battle over issues that include postal rate increases, post office closures and service reductions.

Instant complaints

Donna’s announcement instantly drew complaints that the Postal Service had overstepped its legal bounds.

“Cutting service...should be the last resort,” the Postal Service’s first choice,” said Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, who co-authored a bill last year that would have halved Saturday delivery service for two years. But conservatives, partic- ularly in the GOP-led House, pushed for the bill in their delayed recognition of the Postal Service’s financial prob- lem.

“Without immediate restructuring, normal operating deficits will in- crease,” said Rep. Eric Swalwell, D-Redwood City (San Francisco County), in a statement. “Service providers, such as O&K, O&K leaders, making the decisions that make up Postal Service, said in a joint letter to key congressional leaders. The Postal Service lost $12.2 billion last year, the agency estimated last February that without service cuts — and congressional reform — that number could reach $16 billion by 2016.

Remnant of the past

The explosive growth of e-commerce and automation has made letters a remnant of a vanished past and pushed the use of first-class mail, tradi- tionally the Postal Service’s main revenue. First-class volume dropped 51 percent between 2000 and 2011, according to a 2012 General Accounting Of- fice report. “We don’t just have the mail volume for six-day delivery,” said James Wiggins, a Postal Service spokesperson in San Francisco. “But the number of packages, including Express Mail and Priority Mail, has grown by 24 percent since 2012, which includes the service that will remain unchanged.

Unlikely on its own, but because it can eliminate:

Saturday mail cut may face challenge

Mauro Redillo delivers the mail in Cilton, N.J., which the Postal Service wants to end on Saturday starting in April.

USCF survey

Researchers at UCSF are conducting a survey of HIV-negative women with HIV-positive male partners about their thoughts on reproduction and family planning. Participants must be between ages 18 and 49. To take the survey, go to survey.marysia.org.

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friend. And this month, she will give birth to her first child — a girl, who, like her mother, is not infected with HIV. Donna, whose infection is so well controlled that the virus is undetectable in his blood, has his family. “She’s due Feb. 18,” Donna said. “I can’t wait.”

Donna and her girlfriend, Caroline, 24, are both being treated at the San Francisco General Hospital’s Ward 86 AIDS clinic through a program that thought to be the first of its kind in the country that caters to straight men who are HIV positive and want to have a family.

The program, called Positive Reproductive Outcomes for Men, is part of the Bay Area Perinatal AIDS Center, which has been helping HIV-negative women give birth to healthy babies for more than a decade. It offers reproductive counsel- ing and care to heterosexual couples, and includes support groups for straight men who are HIV positive.

Having kids now safe

There is no cure for Denver’s HIV infection, but for men and women like her, having children brings a new possibility of life for them.

“I can’t tell you how much I love my son,” Guy Van Dusen, a nurse in Ward 86, “I love the freedom of relief on the faces of our patients when they discover that a top priority they talk about and that there are options for them to do this.”

“With all of our patients, once they know they have HIV positive infection, they respond. They told them- selves to stop thinking about a family. This is one major step for them. It is absolutely safe, in a controlled way, to have a family and can result in a family.”

AIDS clinic, through a new

But the key is that it’s pos- sible to have a family, doctors say.

A paradigm shift

“It’s a bit of a paradigm shift,” said Dr. Brad Hare, medical director of Ward 86. “We know now that it’s absol- utely safe, in a controlled way, for people to have healthy sex that protects their partners and can result in a family.”

Starting a family was not an option for most HIV-infected men in the past and “now the risk of passing the virus on to an uninfected partner – the child – was too great. Even if a healthy baby was born, most people with HIV who died from AIDS within a few years of becoming infected, so they would never be able to pass their children.”

The first break in family planning for HIV-infected individuals was the lifting of an adoption ban in the mid-1990s. Around the same time, scientists discovered how to prevent the spread of HIV from infected mothers to their newborns.

In the 2000s, some couples involved in clinical trials started to have children. In 2009, the National Academy of Sciences recommended that states lift their adoption bans on children of HIV-infected parents.

In the last two years, scien- tists also have shown that married people can protect themselves by taking antiretroviral drugs. Doctors have put all of that information together to determin- e that men and women who are HIV positive and want to start a family can safe- ly have sex with the goal of seroconverting pregnant women. There are strict guidelines – most impor- tant, the HIV-positive part- ner must be taking antiretrovi- ral drugs and have a low viral load.

Couples are instructed to have unprotected sex only when the woman is ovulating and to use condoms at all other times. In some cases, the unin- fected partner might also take antiretroviral drugs to offer some protection. But the key is that it’s pos- sible, with a family, doctors say.

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The cuts and other changes that threaten that goal, say oppo- nents of the new delivery plan.

Ending Saturday delivery is “diminuendos idea that would have a profoundly negative impact on the Postal Service and on millions of customers,” said Pedro Bojorquez, presi- dent of the National Associa- tion of Letter Carriers.

Residents in small Bay Area towns where the post office is a community center re- act with a mixture of anger and resignation.

In Canyon, a hamlet of 200 people in the East Bay hills west of San Francisco, the announcement was just the latest change to fear that would weaken the small post office. Some residents have had a post office since 1852, but the Postal Service has already said it plans to cut the office’s hours and eliminate the postmaster position.

Without a post office, hours “have been reduced over the years and, for many, it’s already a very inconvenient place to go,” said Debbie Sanchez, 33, who recently moved to the Santa Cruz Mountains community of Ganada. “If we don’t get any bills on Saturday,” she said, “I don’t know how I look at that.”

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