I used to be an injection drug user, and sometimes I shared needles. I've been clean and sober now for nearly nine years. Yet even today, when I think that the kind of prevention AIDS Action teaches could have saved me from this virus, I feel a bit humbled.

One of the most critical things AIDS Action does for people like me is welcome us into support groups that help us cope with the difficult moments. The newly diagnosed, long-term survivors, women, those recovering from addictions, friends, lovers, family -- all find a special place here with others who share their hardship.

I know how absolutely critical my support group was to me as I struggled with accepting my diagnosis. I saw how the virus was hurting other people besides me, and I knew I wasn't so alone.

Getting through everyday living with AIDS takes an awful lot. I'd like to tell you more about it.

When you have AIDS, you learn to accept disappointment. You watch your own hope gradually wearing thin. You put up with fevers, infections, and malaise. You live with financial insecurity. And you feel like the future is a very tentative place.

And what about the loss of energy you feel when you have AIDS, the inability to tend to your own responsibilities or take care of anyone else? When I feel sad that because I have AIDS I will not have children, I wonder how those mothers with AIDS manage at all.

I know how it feels to live with AIDS. But my life, in fact, is a piece of cake compared to what other people with AIDS face.

I have a healthy husband who loves me no matter what, a good disability plan from my former job, medical treatment as good as it comes for this impossible condition, a supportive family, and more.

What I have, so many others don't. That's why they turn to AIDS Action. Here, people who aren't as lucky as I am get help with all kinds of day-to-day needs that well people simply take for granted.

For instance, AIDS Action's trained volunteer "Buddies" provide desperately needed one-to-one friendship, support, and practical help to people with AIDS.

Having someone who will be there no matter what -- to provide help as well as friendship -- is awfully important when you're living with AIDS.

And what about food, housekeeping, travel to and from medical treatments?

Those who are well cannot begin to imagine how much a person with AIDS depends on help with the most basic daily needs. Last year, AIDS Action volunteers devoted more than 65,000 hours to deliver fresh and frozen meals, distribute donated household items, give rides to and from medical treatments, and much more.

This is help that's badly needed as a person struggles with the reality of HIV. What's it like? For several years now, I've lived with constant fatigue, headaches, allergic reactions, hair loss, yeast infections, muscle pain, and eye problems.

And the medications that are supposed to make me better are appallingly hard to tolerate. AZT decimated my white blood count. Antibiotics to fight off those killing infections give me rashes and fevers. DDI makes me feel like my feet are asleep all the time.

This is life with AIDS. My reactions aren't unusual at all.

That's one of the reasons I depend so much on AIDS Action's work with "wellness." I've learned how to keep as free as possible from infection and make myself more comfortable through holistic approaches like acupuncture, massage, and nutrition.

Each year, AIDS Action provides hundreds of referrals for alternative therapies to help control the virus and ease pain. And its HIV Resource Library informs clients about new drug trials and treatment options so they can work to improve their care.

Most important of all, at AIDS Action there is always a place to turn for answers to questions, for help resolving problems, for and referrals to needed services. That's really crucial for me and the 1200 other people with AIDS who are AIDS Action's clients.

And what about the most fundamental need of all -- a place to live? Imagine how terrible the threat of homelessness is to a person with AIDS. Like me, most are unable to work. For the AIDS Action client who depends on disability payments for all of his or her income, this amounts on average to barely $500 a month.

In the past year, AIDS Action made hundreds of referrals for better, more affordable housing. And its vigorous advocacy for more compassionate public policies means housing resources are now more readily available to people with AIDS. The work continues.

And what about the personal business of life? Over the past year, AIDS Action answered 6,697 calls from people with AIDS needing financial advocacy. More than 460 emergency cash grants -- totaling more than $88,000 -- were disbursed to help people with such urgent basic expenses as rent and food.

And, through 90 volunteer lawyers, AIDS Action provided free advice on everything from insurance claims to discrimination, taxes, and writing a will.

I'm lucky because my husband is by my side helping with many of these challenges. He shares in the work. But there are some things he just can't feel like I can.

Like the disappointment and fear ...

(please turn)