

# Group mourns AIDS victims

By BRYAN LITFIN

Special to the Daily Beacon

A local organization is encouraging Knoxvilleans to wear black denim arm bands to commemorate the first 100,000 Americans to die from AIDS, said Charles Rees, executive director for a.i.d.s. Response Knoxville.

"The death toll for AIDS in the United States surpassed 100,000 in late December, according to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. aRK is concerned that Knoxvilleans may be complacent about the epidemic now that much of the hysteria of the eighties is over," according to a press release from aRK.

Participants are encouraged to commit to wearing the arm bands for 100,000 minutes between March 22 and Memorial Day. Each person receiving an arm band is asked to make a \$5 donation to aRK's Emergency Assistance Fund, but the donation is waived for those unable to pay.

The Emergency Assistance Fund is used to provide financial support to AIDS patients too sick to work.

Of the 500 arm bands made by aRK clients and volunteers, 200 or 300 are left, Rees said in a phone interview he is pleased with the response so far.

Michael Smith, a volunteer with aRK, said the AIDS epidemic is more threatening than diseases such as cancer.

"AIDS has already grown far worse and taken more lives in a shorter time. AIDS has taken many lives already, and cancer has been around a whole lot longer," he said. "(AIDS) is still here and it's continu-

ing to kill.

aRK is an organization that helps PWA's -- people with AIDS -- and HIV-positive people. We do emergency relief and housing assistance. We're here for people that have been discriminated against," he said.

Rees said 89 cases of AIDS were reported in Knox County in 1990, and trends indicate half that amount have probably died. He noted those are just the reported cases, and there is "a real problem with underreporting.

"You have to look beyond the number that have died," he said. "One and a half million people are infected with the virus. We have treatments to help people live longer, but as of now we don't have a cure. But, there's always hope."

aRK's task is to provide services and support groups for people with AIDS. Assistance in daily living, such as house cleaning or transportation to the doctor, is provided for those too sick to care for themselves, Rees said.

"A lot of people die from this and a lot of people get very sick. This is a health problem on a scale we've never had to deal with," he said.

Education of the public about AIDS issues is also one of aRK's goals.

"Knoxvillians need to know how not to get it and they need to know that if they think they might have been exposed to the virus, they need to go down to the Health Department to get tested," he said.

"Over 40 percent of the people we deal with were infected by the virus by the age of 21. Late high school and college age is the time when many people are getting it," ■