

AIDS groups push for stable federal funding



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Over the last two years, Conservatives took away or redirected \$21 million from HIV/AIDS response

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When Angel Parks reads the federal parties' platforms, she doesn't see anything about how to manage HIV, even though it infects nearly 2,500 Canadians each year.

She does know that over the last two years the Conservatives took away or redirected nearly \$21 million out of the federal AIDS funding basket and that affects her. Parks is one of the 58,000 Canadians living with HIV. She is not sure how she was infected – it was either from an ex-boyfriend or when the former prison guard mistakenly cut herself on a razor blade used by multiple prisoners at the Don Jail.

"Taking money out means less prevention, care and treatment equally distributed across Canada," Parks said yesterday after a press conference at the AIDS Committee of Toronto. "The programs are crucial to my survival."

According to the Canadian AIDS Society, in 2004, the federal government announced a new federal initiative to strengthen the national response to HIV/AIDS. The government said they would increase funding from \$42.2 million to \$84.4 million by 2008-2009.

However, that funding, which should have reached \$84.4 million this fiscal year, was \$11.8 million lower and over the last two years, the lost funding has totalled more than \$21 million. About \$5.2 million in funding was redirected to the Bill Gates HIV/AIDS vaccine initiative. Activists say money shouldn't be taken out of education and community support programs to pay for the hunt for a vaccine. Both should be funded, they say.

"We are stunned by the silence surrounding HIV/AIDS in this election," said Monique Doolittle-Romas, executive director of the Canadian AIDS Society. "This is a topic worthy of discussion especially since HIV/AIDS is preventable."

The society has approached and now gathered commitments from four out of the five federal parties that they will provide stable federal funding for AIDS and they all agree on the necessity of harm reduction programs, she said. Those commitments came from the Liberals, the Green Party, the Bloc and the New Democratic Party.

Parks was 25 when she found out she had HIV after a routine blood test performed as part of her physical. She says it was one of the scariest days of her life. She now lives on anti-AIDS medication, taking five pills a day.

She credits family and regular meetings of support in the HIV/AIDS community for getting her through the tough times of living with the disease.

"I turned to my family, friends and community but when it comes to HIV, not everyone has friends, family and community," she said.

Now the positive youth co-ordinator at the AIDS Committee of Toronto, Parks credits AIDS organizations as the sentinels – making sure no one with HIV is left alone, worried about where they will get their next meal or getting access to medication.