

AIDS groups fear federal funding cuts

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Community organizations that support people with HIV or AIDS say they're being kept in the dark about federal government plans to cut millions of dollars in funding.

Groups worried about having to lay off staff and ditch programs have been asking the government for months to provide a firm amount — province by province — on how much will be cut, said Susan Cress, chairwoman of the Alberta Community Council on HIV.

The government has announced that a total of \$26-million will be redirected from HIV-AIDS initiatives to efforts at developing an HIV vaccine, but support groups don't know when those cuts are coming or how much may be taken from them.

“At this point in time, one would think somebody would be able to draw a line in the sand to say, ‘This is what it's going to look like,’” said Ms. Cress. “We don't have it.”

The cuts are moving across the country as different programs come up for renewal, said Rick Kennedy, executive director of the Ontario AIDS network.

Ontario's funding was slashed by 30 per cent last year, while Quebec organizations stand to lose 24 per cent of their funding this year, he said. Alberta's money has only been extended for six months and support groups have been told that some type of cut will follow when it runs out.

A big fear is that less money will lead to a rising rate of infection among the most vulnerable: intravenous drug users, homosexual men and prisoners.

“We're concerned about having to lay off staff, having to discontinue programs, and having our ability to fight HIV through prevention and education substantially reduced,” said Mr. Kennedy.

His group has partnered with the Alberta council and a similar Quebec organization to lobby the government to reinstate funding and stop further cuts. They've created a postcard mail-in campaign with the slogan “Cutting Funding Cutting Lives.”

While front-line AIDS workers are dismayed at the thought of cutting important prevention programs, they say they're more shocked at how the government has handled the matter.

“I have been in this field, doing this work, for 23 years. And we have never been handled this way, or managed this way, or treated this way,” said Michael Sobota, who has been executive director of AIDS Thunder Bay since it was created in 1985.

“The continued delays in decision-making make us all very, very worried about the existing grants that we have — that the clock is ticking on them.”

Some question whether the government's policy on AIDS funding may have more to do with morals than money.

Liberal MP Carolyn Bennett said the way AIDS groups are being treated was reflected in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's decision to skip an international HIV-AIDS conference in Toronto last year. She also points to the government's reluctance to support, for example, safe-injection sites that try to reduce the harm done to addicts without forcing them to come clean.

“The only thing that can happen is that the incidence of these diseases like AIDS will go up,” said Ms. Bennett.

Mr. Sobota points to a remark made by Mr. Harper last October: “If you remain an addict, I don't care how much harm you reduce, you're going to have a short and miserable life.”

The office of Health Minister Tony Clement said he was travelling and referred inquiries back to the Public Health Agency of Canada. No one from the agency was available for an interview about the issue.

In an e-mail, spokeswoman Jacinthe Perras said the majority of the \$26-million redirected to the vaccine initiative will not come from “the community funding envelope.”

“Great effort has been taken to minimize the impact of the redirection of funding on community programs,” she wrote.

In a letter to Mr. Kennedy in March, Mr. Clement said he appreciates the concerns the cuts have raised and added the government is “taking action to mitigate the negative impact of these reductions.”

Mr. Clement said that, vaccine dollars included, the federal Conservatives are spending more on HIV-AIDS than any preceding Canadian government.

Mr. Kennedy acknowledges that everyone wants a vaccine, but suggests money going to that goal shouldn't be included in the overall spending target of \$84.4-million.

Some workers are scared to speak up due to the government's power to take away more money if they're met with dissent, Mr. Sobota said, adding he's not one of them.

“What we're talking about is Canadians' lives,” he said. “I will fight tooth and nail to make sure that the funding stays in place for these approaches, and I will hold the government to account for it.”