

Ottawa redirects AIDS funds for Gates initiative

Money for community programs in Ontario slashed 30 per cent

GLORIA GALLOWAY

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OTTAWA — Federal funding for community AIDS programs in Ontario is being slashed as the Conservative government readjusts overall spending and redirects money to an AIDS vaccine initiative it announced earlier this year with Bill Gates.

Money that helps prevent local organizations stem the spread of the virus and provide support to those infected is being reduced by 30 per cent across the province in this fiscal year.

Ontario was targeted because its funding cycle is different than that of other provinces, federal health officials explained, and much of the money for special projects had not been allocated as it had been elsewhere in the country.

But Ottawa is conducting a review of all AIDS programs it will fund next year, and Frank Plummer, the director-general for the Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control, said: "I think the pain, if any, will be spread around."

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When the money for the \$139-million Canadian HIV Vaccine Initiative was announced in February, a federal news release boasted that

"Canada's New Government and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have committed major new funding."

The Gates Foundation, which would not comment on the matter Wednesday, insists that any money it matches when contributing to AIDS projects must come from new sources. In fact, approximately \$26-million of the government's portion had been redirected from other AIDS projects, including the community programs in Ontario. But Dr. Plummer said he expects the Gates Foundation to take no issue with the reallocation because the government contributed more than enough new money to match the \$28-million that came from Mr. Gates.

None of the money announced for the vaccine initiative has actually made it into the hands of researchers, according to a response to an Access to Information request filed by The Globe and Mail.

"It takes time to put in place a new program," Dr. Plummer explained.

A call for proposals for consultation on the vaccine-production facility that is part of the CHVI is expected to go out shortly, he said. And money for vaccine research should start flowing in the next fiscal year.

As for the funding cuts, Rita Smith, a spokeswoman for Health Minister Tony Clement, stressed that Mr. Clement has promised that the federal AIDS initiative will get in excess of \$84.4-million next year as promised in a plan mapped out by the previous Liberal government.

But that will include the money for the vaccine initiative – money the Liberals did not factor into the total. The minister will meet with AIDS groups next week, after World AIDS Day on Saturday, to discuss future funding allocations.

While the special-projects money anticipated by the community groups in Ontario has been cut by 60 per cent, Ms. Smith said the actual program funding has not been touched and the total amount trimmed comes to just over a million dollars.

And she said the cuts were actually approved by the Liberals while they were still in office.

But Carolyn Bennett, the Liberal MP who was at one time the minister responsible for the Public Health Agency of Canada, said her government always juggled money within the agency to ensure that

the community AIDS groups received all the funding they had been promised.

Dr. Bennett said she hoped Mr. Gates would implore the government to put the "million that's being stolen from community supports and services for prevention and people living with AIDS back into those programs and give new money to match the Gates money."

Peter Hayes, executive director of the AIDS Committee of London, said the funding cuts will mean the end of programs such as one that addresses the higher rate of AIDS and HIV in the gay male population. "The reality is we are making headway in infection rates in our gay male population and to pull that resource now prevents us from really being able to continue," Mr. Hayes said.

Monique Doolittle-Romas of the Canadian AIDS Society said her organization is worried about the effect the cuts will have on community programs. "We are 100 per cent supportive of the development of vaccines," she said, but she added that she hopes the minister will not take the money out of the previously committed AIDS funding initiative.

The Canadian AIDS Society sent out letters on Oct. 1 warning that cuts could be coming. When asked why they did not draw attention to the issue at that time, Ms. Doolittle-Romas said they wanted more information before going public. But other AIDS groups said the silence stemmed from fears that there would be federal retaliation.

Ms. Smith said that notion is "offensive."