

AIDS activists call PM vengeful



Gary Yokoyama, the Hamilton Spectator



A vigil at Christ's Church Cathedral to mark the eve of World AIDS Day

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They say only Ontario agencies have been affected by federal funding cuts

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Local AIDS activists say a \$1 million cut in federal funding to grassroots HIV-prevention programs in Ontario is an act of revenge by Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Only Ontario agencies are being cut because they were the ones most public in their criticism of Harper's decision to skip the International AIDS Conference held in Toronto last year, says Rob Alexander, support services co-ordinator of the AIDS Network of Hamilton.

"We are very clearly identifying this as a retaliation," Alexander said yesterday.

"Most of the protests and the AIDS activists and agencies who responded to Mr. Harper not attending the conference were Ontario-based."

Only Ontario AIDS agencies have, so far, been affected by the cuts to funding provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC).

A vigil last night at Christ's Church Cathedral to mark the eve of World AIDS Day today concluded with a protest over the cuts.

Here in Hamilton, it means services such as prevention talks in schools, training local health-care students to treat people living with HIV, and a buddy system to address increased rates of depression and suicide among the newly diagnosed are now on the chopping block.

"My concern is in some ways the arbitrariness of the decisions that get made," said Dr. Fiona Smaill, chair of pathology and molecular medicine at the Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine at McMaster University.

"This announcement really concerns me over how our policies around HIV/AIDS are being established and implemented at the federal level and how can we assure that the needs of our affected community and researchers are being thought through in a way that's really appropriate for an issue of this importance," said Smaill, who is also a co-director of special immunology services with the HIV Clinic and a doctor who treats people with HIV.

The cuts are the result of a government-wide cost-cutting program, said Alain Desroches, spokesperson for the public health agency. As well, some of the money is being redirected to a vaccine research initiative on which the federal government is partnering with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

"The federal government is trying to say this is new money but they're just shifting money from community-based programs in Canada to the vaccine research," Alexander said.

Some of the \$26 million from the overall federal AIDS initiative that is going to vaccine research is new money and some of it is redirected from PHAC, Desroches said. "The (PHAC) agency didn't single out AIDS programs," Desroches said. "It's all our programs."

Ontario was the only province hit by the cuts because funding for specific community projects had not yet been confirmed there, Desroches said.

The prime minister's office did not return calls.

"You can't trade off a vaccine versus a patient with HIV, you know," said Smaill. "These are not fair decisions to be made."

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