

Local care was cut to fund vaccine search: Liberals

Bill Gates getting cash patients need, MP says

RENE BRUEMMER, The Gazette

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Liberal MPs visiting a Montreal AIDS hospice lambasted the Conservative government yesterday, accusing it of taking millions from poor AIDS/HIV community programs to give to rich U.S. philanthropist Bill Gates.

"They're stealing our money to give to Gates," said Liberal health critic Carolyn Bennett, quoting a chorus emanating from community groups. Mount Royal MP Irwin Cotler and MP Ken Dryden (York Centre, Ont.) joined Bennett on the visit as part of World AIDS Day.

Organizations that work in prevention, education and research dealing with AIDS, as well as caring for many of the 58,000 Canadians infected, have charged that Stephen Harper's government is taking \$15 million out of \$84 million promised by the Liberal government in 2004. That money was to be distributed over five years.

Instead, \$15 million is going to Ottawa's \$139-million Canadian HIV Vaccine Initiative. Announced last February, the initiative is connected to a global project spearheaded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation seeking a vaccine to prevent the disease.

Bennett said an inquiry, as well as talks with Conservative Health Minister Tony Clement, confirmed the allegations. Some groups report they're losing 30 to 60 per cent of their funding.

"We hope Mr. Gates will be persuaded to put the money back," she said.

In an email yesterday, Clement shifted the blame to Bennett.

"It was the former secretary of state for public health, Carolyn Bennett, and her Liberal colleagues who voted to slash \$16 million at the Public Health Agency," in cuts announced in the 2004 and 2005 budgets, Clement said. Bennett said their investigation with the health agency proved otherwise.

The effects are being felt at residences like Maison Plein Coeur, director Louis Marie Gagnon said. "Hospices are already closing, and others will close," he said. "If it continues like this, we will be shut in five years."

Life expectancy in Canada for someone infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is as high as 20 years, said Jean Boulanger, president of the Maison's board of directors. But the effects of the disease and the medications needed to combat it mean many can no longer work or function normally.

The hospice has fewer than a dozen beds, but its nine employees and 150 volunteers provide services to 400 patients in the Centre-Sud district, Quebec's hardest hit. They provide car rides, accompaniment and encouragement to keep living a full life despite the disease.

"If we want to give dignity to people with AIDS, you need these programs," Gagnon said.

About 15,000 Quebecers are infected with HIV, and the rate at which young homosexual men are becoming infected jumped 44 per cent between 2004 and 2006, Gagnon said, underlining the importance of continued education. About 4,500 Canadians are infected each year.

Dryden characterized the cutbacks as one more in a series of Conservative moves - from Harper's refusal to attend Montreal's Outgames and an international AIDS conference in Toronto last summer to stalling safe-injection sites in Vancouver - that is indicative of the party's ideology. "There is a disturbing pattern there, a way of seeing the country, and its people, and certain individuals. And it is very troubling."

The country needs to focus on prevention, support, research and education and the global picture, Cotler said.

"It's not a question of partisan politics. It's a question of values."

rbruemmer@thegazette.canwest.com

Restore Cuts To Community Groups, Fund Vaccine Research Says AIDS Society

OTTAWA

On World AIDS Day, December 1, 1998, the Canadian AIDS Society is calling on the federal government to restore operational funding for community-based AIDS groups and create a special fund dedicated to research and development of an AIDS vaccine. Operational funding for community-based AIDS groups under the Canadian HIV/AIDS Strategy has remained fixed for the past eight years, and is not sufficient to meet the needs of an expanding and rapidly changing HIV/AIDS epidemic. Some community AIDS groups are even facing funding cuts.

In the Atlantic provinces, for example, operational funding has been cut by 10 percent, meaning that AIDS groups are forced to focus their initiatives on fundraising at the expense of prevention and services to people living with HIV/AIDS.

"Community-based AIDS groups have rallied to the cause over the last ten years and want to continue to expand their capacity to respond, but we won't be able to do this if the government continues to whittle away our funds," says Michael Wartman, Chair of SIDA/AIDS Moncton. The organization already fundraises over half of its annual budget, and receives no provincial funding. The 10 percent federal funding cut is equivalent to that organization's annual rent.

The demand on community-based AIDS groups has been growing steadily as the epidemic in Canada continues to expand. Every day, almost a dozen Canadians are infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. The proportion of HIV infections is increasing amongst new populations, including people who use needles to inject drugs (including steroids), youth, young gay men, women, and Aboriginals.

"We're doing a lot more with less," says Terrence Stewart, Chair of the Canadian AIDS Society. "HIV is spreading to new populations, and we've had to change the way we're doing the work, to respond to the needs of all who are affected."

Recognizing that the face of HIV/AIDS has changed, many groups are actively expanding and diversifying their services to meet the needs of emerging populations affected by the virus, particularly marginalized populations that are often hard to reach. Faced with this significant

challenge, many AIDS groups are asking themselves how they will survive.

"The question we're all asking on World AIDS Day is 'how do we do a growing amount of work, with a more diverse client-base and less funding'?" says Stewart.

Provincial downloading of responsibility to municipalities has placed an added strain on AIDS groups. More and more community groups are being asked to provide a wide range of social support services, from emergency food vouchers, bus tickets, and help finding safe housing, to buddy programs and escorts for medical appointments.

In Ontario, for example, the effects are being felt already. Food banks and Emergency Financial Assistance programs are swamped. In Peterborough, the anonymous testing site was closed. Many other communities fear for the funding of anonymous testing and needle exchange sites, as well as for condoms, which have traditionally been provided free-of-charge to AIDS groups by the city's public health department.

AIDS has already taken the lives of millions of men, women and children worldwide. In a report released November 24, UNAIDS (the United Nations program on AIDS) and the World Health Organization revealed that HIV infections increased by 10% in 1998, bringing the total number of people living with HIV around the globe to 33.4 million. No country has been left untouched. In light of these disturbing international statistics, the Canadian AIDS Society calls upon the Canadian government to support the international search for a vaccine against HIV.

"With the worldwide epidemic still growing out of control, we urgently call on Canada to contribute to this global initiative," says Stewart.

On May 18, 1997, United States President Bill Clinton asked that we "commit ourselves to developing an AIDS vaccine within the next decade." Leaders of the eight largest industrialized nations, including Canada, have endorsed this goal, but have yet to commit to a specific plan of action.

According to Stewart, "We support the vaccine initiative, but believe the government should create additional funds for it, because the \$42.2 million isn't enough to deal with the epidemic in Canada."