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Positively cash-strapped

**Getting the run-around from the feds,
HIV/AIDS groups are wondering
where all their money went**

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by [PATRICK LEJTENYI](#)

There is little doubt in anyone's mind that the world is in desperate need of a vaccine against HIV/AIDS. The numbers speak for themselves: some 40 million infected worldwide, 25 million dead, and the appearance of a health crisis so severe it can cripple the world's most vulnerable economies for generations.

So when Prime Minister Stephen Harper proposed, in February 2007, the Canadian HIV Vaccine Initiative in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, there was some cause for hope. The Gates Foundation is one of the wealthiest charities in the world, and has dispersed over \$14-billion (U.S.) since its inception in 2000, including over a quarter billion dollars towards a malaria vaccine.

But what's good for the HIV vaccine goose isn't necessarily good for the HIV treatment gander. Community groups in Quebec and Ontario are complaining that the federal government is withholding funds promised them by previous Liberal governments, and fear for their financial future. They say that \$23-million worth of money promised them is being transferred from community groups to the Gates Foundation, and is effectively starving them of funds.

No funds, no explanation

"We all have the same worry," says Lyse Pinault, the executive director of COCQ-SIDA, an umbrella organization of Quebec AIDS community groups. She says that in 2004, the federal government doubled the amount of money committed to fighting HIV/AIDS in Canada from \$42-million to \$84-million, to be dispersed by March 31, 2009. But according to Pinault and the Ontario AIDS Network, funds began drying up around the same time as Stephen Harper's Conservative government was elected in early 2006. Anticipated increases in funding evaporated, and the groups have been left struggling for an explanation.

"Next year we're slated for \$3.2-million," says Pinault. "But we haven't seen it. We don't know why." She says repeated requests to the federal Health Ministry revealed nothing, other than specific programs are still under review—and have been, for over a year.

According to Pinault, about 70 per cent of the projects COCQ-SIDA members work on are long-term, spanning the four years of funding they were promised in 2004. The remaining 30 per cent are short-term, and more vulnerable to sudden cuts. In all, she says 23 organizations represented by COCQ-SIDA receive—or should be receiving—federal funds from the Public Health Agency of Canada, mostly for treatment and support of HIV/AIDS patients.

"We never receive any news," she says. "We're not certain it's the Prime Minister's office that's making the decisions."

With the Harper government's notorious tight lip, it's hardly surprising that COCQ-SIDA and the Ontario AIDS Network aren't receiving news. But Pinault is convinced that HIV/AIDS patients aren't high on the Conservatives' list of priorities.

"This is not a government that is sensitive to HIV," says Pinault. "We work with homosexuals, with drug users and ethnic minorities—these aren't groups that rate high at Sunday mass."

Shades of Harris

But what individual groups fear more than substantial funding cuts are complete funding cuts. One group contacted by the *Mirror* asked not to be identified, fearing that bad-mouthing the federal government will make funding applications a nightmare, and referred all on-the-record quotes to COCQ-SIDA. This kind of threat is familiar to Carolyn Bennett, a Toronto doctor turned federal Liberal MP and the former minister of state for public health. Now the Liberal health critic, she likens the current federal government to a national version of Ontario's former Tory government.

"We saw this during the Mike Harris years," she says. "We called it the Big Chill. Groups [that complained] about government funding were faced with a punitive approach: 'If you don't like these cuts, then we'll show you real cuts.' I'm totally familiar with it." Tony Clement, the current federal Health Minister, and Jim Flaherty, the current federal Finance Minister, are both alumni of the Harris Conservatives.

"With Mike Harris, across the province, groups that should have spoken out were told that their funding would be at risk," she says. "We lived it in Ontario, and I feel exactly the same thing is happening now."

Last Thursday, Nov. 22, at a federal Health Committee meeting, Bennett and her Bloc Québécois counterpart Christiane Gagnon gave Clement a roasting over the cuts, and expect to follow it up this week with a joint declaration that may include the NDP's critic. "We're hoping for a one-two-three punch," says Bennett.

"There's something like \$600,000 missing from COCQ-SIDA," says Gagnon. "We want to know, where did the money go? They are having real difficulty supporting community organizations. The Health Ministry keeps saying, 'We'll get back to you,' but we've been trying to get an answer for two months."

Clement is expected to meet with some non-governmental and community organizations on Thursday, Dec. 6, but Bennett suspects the date was chosen to deliberately avoid bringing up the issue before Saturday, Dec. 1, World AIDS Day.