

HIV/AIDS in Toronto: It's our problem too

By [Caroline Shaheed](#) | Published 11/30/2007 |

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Last Thursday the [AIDS Committee of Toronto](#) held a panel discussion titled "Looking back, Moving Forward: 25 years of HIV/AIDS in Toronto."

The panel consisted of City Councillor [Kyle Rae](#), Ward 27, Tim McCaskell, founding member of [AIDS Action Now](#), Wangari Esther Thrarao, research manager at [Women's Health in Women's Hands](#) and Richard Elliott, executive director of [Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network](#). Dairen Taylor, co-founder of [Voices of Positive Women](#), moderated the very well attended event.

There were no empty seats in the house, it was standing room only, and everyone was paying attention. The message was not sugar coated; it was not toned down for a sensitive audience. The message was HIV/AIDS has been in Toronto for 25 years and it's still here and people are still getting infected.

"We are watching another public health disaster in slow motion," Elliott said. HIV/AIDS no longer has its media darling status, it is not new.

"I think there is a perception that we have a handle on HIV, that it is manageable. It's not," McCaskell said.

The issue of HIV/AIDS being someone else's disease was front and centre of the evening's discussion. After 25 years people still think it can't happen to them.

"People need to know if this epidemic moves into the general population, we will be like the countries they think AIDS only happens in," Thrarao said. "We need to make people understand, you can't separate what is happening in Africa from what is happening here."

HIV/AIDS is a global epidemic and Canada needs to start playing a savvier role. On Wednesday federal funding for community AIDS programs in Ontario was slashed by the Conservative government.

Stephen Harper's government decided to readjust overall spending and redirect money to an AIDS vaccine initiative that it announced earlier this year with Bill Gates.

Organizations that help support HIV/AIDS infected clients and provide information about the disease will receive 30 per cent less funding in this fiscal year. AIDS service organizations already run on tight budgets; heavily depend on volunteers and cannot afford more funding cuts.

"This is labour intensive work it involves building on bits of information over lengths of time. People need to understand this is they are going to do something about it. And it's hard to do that without funding," said McCaskell.

John Maxwell, director of special projects at ACT reminded the audience at the end of the discussion that "One of the biggest problems is that people are not engaged. We need to remember that silence equals death, but action equals life."