

AIDS funding under attack

NEWS / Cuts leave groups scared, uncertain

Krishna Rau / Xtra / Thursday, December 06, 2007

The federal government's \$1-million funding cut to AIDS programs in Ontario is part of an agenda that places saving money over lives and is aimed at marginalizing those living with the disease, say AIDS service organizations.

"I don't think a government that returns a \$14-billion surplus is in deep need of funds," says Lori Lucier, the executive director of the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT). "I think a government that has made a priority of tax cuts for big corporations and wealthy individuals has chosen to have the brunt of those policies fall on the backs of people with AIDS."

Lucier says AIDS service organizations in Ontario have become victims of the government's anti-Ontario bias.

"It makes no sense to me that a million dollars can be removed from the pot of the province that has the largest number of AIDS cases," she says.

ACT lost \$175,000 in funding as of March, says Lucier.

The federal government announced a \$1-million funding cut from the AIDS Community Action Program (ACAP) for Ontario this fall. ACAP, which is divided into different regions across the country, provides funding for local AIDS service organizations. The government has agreed to continue to provide funding to Ontario organizations that already receive ACAP funding until March 2009. But it won't say how much that funding will be and it won't say what will happen after that.

Ontario is the only region whose funding has been cut so far, although the government says cuts will be made nationwide.

"We've been advised that there will be cuts coming to other regions," says Rick Anderson, the executive director of the Ontario AIDS Network, an umbrella group of AIDS organizations. "But Ontario was hit first and we believe hardest."

Anderson says the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), which administers the ACAP program, makes no secret of the fact that the funding cut was partially about reducing the federal deficit.

A letter from Mauricette Howlett, the PHAC regional director for Ontario, to Kennedy dated Nov 6 reads: "The reduction in HIV/AIDS grants and contributions is the result of two separate processes: the government-wide expenditure review process... and a realignment of federal government investments in HIV/AIDS."

That "realignment of federal government investments" means part of that \$1-million cut is being redirected into the government's new commitment to an AIDS vaccine. According to the Globe and Mail another \$25 million has been redirected from other AIDS funding programs.

In February Health Minister Tony Clement announced the government was entering into a partnership with The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to create the Canadian HIV Vaccine Initiative. The Gates Foundation is putting in \$28 million and the government is contributing \$111 million, which Clement promised would be new money.

But Richard Elliott, the executive director of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (CHALN), says domestic AIDS programs may not be the only ones to have funding redirected to the vaccine.

"There's suggestions that some may come from the Canadian International Development Agency, some of which may be AIDS-related," he says. "That's also of concern to us."

Elliott says that the status of funding for national organizations like CHALN is also uncertain. The only national organization with funding guaranteed beyond 2008 is the Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE).

"The funding pot that used to be available to supply operational funding is no longer available," Elliott says. "Funding is now on a project basis."

"In the realignment they eliminated the Legal, Ethical and Human Rights Fund. We have several hundred thousand dollars in project funds that are not continuing."

Elliott points to the new Specific Populations Fund as another example of uncertainty.

"It's been over a year since proposals were submitted to that fund," he says. "Injection drug users and prisoners, no project involving them has been approved."

Elliott says the newly created Knowledge Exchange Fund has already committed all of its funding to CATIE, which will act as a national clearinghouse for prevention information.

The result, says Elliott, will leave organizations like CHALN hoping CATIE shares the wealth.

Laurie Edmiston, the executive director of CATIE, writes in an email that CATIE will consult with other organizations about the best way to distribute the money.

"Once consultations have been completed in the spring, new and existing partnerships will be determined and developed, which will likely be in the underdeveloped area of HIV prevention," she writes. "It's especially lacking any focus on specific populations and new immigrants."

At a Nov 29 ACT forum Tim McCaskell, one of the founders of AIDS Action Now, said it's all part of Stephen Harper's plan to privatize AIDS services.

"This government we've got now is mean and nasty," he said. "It's not just that Stephen Harper is a creep. He has an agenda that government shouldn't be in the services business. Services should be handled by the market. That's where he's going."