



Harm Reduction and the Federal Government's New Anti-Drug Strategy

In October 2007, the Federal Government unveiled a National Anti-Drug Strategy that mandates new funding for law enforcement, prevention education, and rehabilitation, but eliminates funding for harm reduction programs – including safer drug use outreach, needle exchanges, safe injection facilities, and methadone clinics. The \$64 million strategy prioritizes the enforcement of drug laws and stiffer penalties for those who break them.

As we have seen from the example of the United States, anti-drug strategies that focus exclusively on law enforcement and abstinence ('Just Say No') messaging can have a negative impact on individuals, families and whole communities. This approach ignores the social, economic, and emotional complexities of drug use, effectively punishing the user by giving them the option to rehabilitate or face legal sanctions. The choice, for some people, is not so simple.

The reality is that some people cannot or will not stop using drugs. Harm reduction pragmatically and realistically acknowledges this fact by providing evidence-based programs and services to lessen the harms associated with drug use¹.

The Federal Government's strategy, on the other hand, discourages open dialogue about drug use, effectively stigmatizing it. As a result, both recreational and habitual users will be less likely to access the information and services they need to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS and stay healthy, or to seek out rehabilitation programs on their own terms. Because the new Anti-Drug Strategy will limit access to services such as needle exchanges and safe injection facilities, we can expect to see higher HIV infection rates and a higher incidence of drug overdoses in the future.

“The reality is that some people cannot or will not stop using drugs.”

Stiffer penalties and increased enforcement have also been shown to impact low-income and marginalized communities disproportionately. Higher incarceration rates increase poverty levels, which in turn make communities more vulnerable to HIV infection. It's a vicious cycle.

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ACT researchers and librarians (from left): Nicole Greenspan, Lily Mac, Winston Husbands, Erica Lee, Lydia Makoroka

New Directions in Research at ACT

Over the past year, ACT's Research Advisory Committee has been hard at work creating a set of directions that will guide agency research over the next few years. Comprised of community-based researchers, ACT staff, policymakers, funders, and people living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs), the Advisory Committee developed the directions to ensure that our work continues to be innovative in its approach and responsive to the needs of the people we serve.

The directions are as follows:

1. Responding to critical program development needs;
2. Integrating support services for PHAs and HIV prevention;
3. Understanding current and emerging needs of the people infected, affected and at risk for HIV, and assessing how to meet those needs;
4. Instituting the principles of Greater Involvement of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GIPA) in AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs) and research.

Two directions in particular merit further explanation:

Integrating support services for PHAs and HIV prevention: traditionally, support services for PHAs and prevention programs for people at risk of HIV infection are delivered separately. Support services are designed to help PHAs cope with the social and physical challenges of living with HIV/AIDS, while preven-

tion programs target vulnerable populations in the form of outreach and education.

A growing body of evidence suggests, however, that there are benefits to integrating support services and HIV prevention programs. The Research Team will explore links between the two and identify how programs and services may be integrated to maximize these benefits.

Instituting the GIPA principles: With their first-hand experience of both HIV/AIDS and the work of organizations such as ACT, PHAs can make important contributions to program development. Wherever possible, research initiatives should include PHAs in decision-making or advisory roles. In addition, research should inform how best to harness the contributions of PHAs for program planning.

Over the coming months, the Research Advisory Committee will be developing guidelines or a strategy to assist staff with using research evidence to develop their programs.

For more information about all four research directions, the Advisory Committee, or ACT research in general, visit www.actontario.org/research.



Winston Husbands Wins OHTN Community Scholar Award

ACT is pleased to announce that Winston Husbands, the agency's Director of Research and Program Development, won a 2007-08 Community Scholar Award this past spring. The Ontario HIV/AIDS Treatment Network created this new award to honour community-based HIV/AIDS researchers whose work shows special promise.

Winston received the award for "Understanding Communities, Engaging Communities," a research program designed to enhance HIV prevention among gay and bisexual men, and African and Caribbean communities in Ontario; identify and reduce the obstacles people living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs) face when returning to work; and improve the way research is translated into HIV/AIDS policy and programming.

One of three recipients of the inaugural Community Scholar Awards, along with Saara Greene from Fife House and Randy Jackson from the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, Winston received \$97,000 to cover the costs associated with his research projects over one year.

Winston has been with ACT since 2001, where he has led the development of ACT's program in community-based research and the agency's commitment to program monitoring and evaluation. Winston has also been a co-Chair of the African and Caribbean Council on HIV/AIDS in Ontario (ACCHO) 2004-2007.

Congratulations, Winston!

Harm Reduction

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As the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network points out, harm reduction is essential to a human rights-centered approach to HIV/AIDS. People who use drugs "have a right to health services that are accessible, affordable, culturally appropriate, available in a non-discriminatory way, and attentive to the needs of those who are marginalized by society." As such, harm reduction is a "concrete manifestation of the right of people who use drugs to comprehensive HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, and care services²."

Research³ indicates that drug policies which include harm reduction as a core principle more effectively mitigate the impact of drug use on individuals, families and communities. By recognizing and accepting that some people will engage in risky behaviour, health workers, social service providers, and police are better able to take a proactive approach to the problem, minimizing harm and maximizing the opportunities for rehabilitation.

The AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) urges Minister of Health Tony Clement to reconsider this 'War on Drugs'-style approach in favour of a robust drug strategy that combines law enforcement, prevention education, treatment, and harm reduction to address drug use and its attendant complexities in Canada.

1. *Effectiveness of Sterile Needle and Syringe Programming in Reducing HIV/AIDS Among Injection Drug Users*. World Health Organization. 2004.
2. *Do Not Cross: Policing and HIV Risk Faced by People Who Use Drugs*. Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. 2007.
3. *Drug control, human rights, and harm reduction in the age of AIDS*. Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. 2004.

The ACT Service Awards



Peter St. Louis (left) receives his 15 Years of Service Award from Program Volunteer Coordinator Sergio Martinez

Every year, the agency recognizes the valuable contributions of our volunteers and staff with our ACT Service Awards. We handed out awards to 30 extremely dedicated volunteers and staff at our Annual General Meeting in November. Thank you to all of them and congratulations to Peter St. Louis, library and fundraising volunteer extraordinaire – this year marked his 15th with ACT!

15 Years of Service (1992 – 2007)

Peter St. Louis (Library and Development)

10 Years of Service (1997 – 2007)

Lori Lucier (Staff)

Stan Fong (Gay Men's Outreach)

Tony King (Library and Board of Directors)

Edwin Loveridge (Access Centre)

Brian Rawson (Gay Men's Outreach)

5 Years of Service (2002 – 2007)

Jim Martin (Staff)

Phil Caissie (Access Centre)

Raul Cano (Support Group Facilitation and Development)

Mario Fonseca (Gay Men's Outreach)

Jane Gilmour (Support Group Facilitation and Development)

Maya Jenkins (Book AIDS)

Heather Jessome (Development)

Joe Manson (Support Group Facilitation and Development)

Anson Mertz (Finance)

Stanley Middlestadt (Book AIDS)

Wendy Shaw (Gay Men's Outreach and Development)

Sarah Siddiqui (Gay Men's Outreach and Support Group Facilitation)

Sean Stichbury (Gay Men's Outreach and Development)

Margaret Ayoung (Development)

Bryan Arseneau (Development)

Keri Barr (Development)

Andree Delisle (Development)

Helen Dzambazov (Development)

Colleen Flanagan (Development)

Patricia Hernandez (Development)

Christine Juhani (Development)

Andy Wang (Development)

Howard Hannaford (Development)

Julia Harrington (Gay Men's Outreach and Youth Programs)

Become a Member of ACT

Have you ever considered becoming a member of the AIDS Committee of Toronto? ACT members play an important role in the agency, choosing the ACT Board of Directors at our yearly annual general meeting and providing valuable input about the strategic directions of the agency. The diversity of perspectives and experience brought together in our network of members enriches our organization and strengthens our connection to the larger community that we serve.

We strive to keep the membership informed of our activities and to offer opportunities for you to be engaged in our work through a variety of means. Members receive a twice-yearly newsletter, annual report, and annual general meeting notices which include the biographies of prospective board members. Members are also encouraged to utilize our library and website to access current information on HIV/AIDS, ACT events and the programs/services we offer.

Our members support and guide us, and in doing so, make a real difference. Memberships are active for the duration of our fiscal year, April 1 – March 31. We are working harder than ever to continue our tradition of a strong membership that supports our mission, vision and guiding principles. We hope that you will join us for the first time or rejoin us again this year.

Visit www.actoronto.org/membership to become a member today!

“Our members support and guide us, and in doing so, make a real difference to our shared community.”

ACT Welcomes New Board Members

At the 2006-07 Annual General Meeting, ACT's membership elected six members to the agency's Board of Directors. ACT welcomes new board members Gayle Matthews, Ken Tong, and Richard Willet, and congratulates returning members Robyn Bolivar, Tony King, and Peter Perdue. All of the new members are experts in their respective professional fields – which vary from accountancy to public health management – and they bring valuable skills to the team.

The Board of Directors helps to shape ACT's mission, vision, and strategic directions, and leads the governance of the agency. Other sitting board members include Karim Karsan (co-Chair), Camille Orridge (co-Chair), Nelson French, Renee Lang (Secretary), John Lavis, and Stephanie Lennox.

Thanks also to our outgoing ACT board members Bob Wallace and Kathy Summers for the leadership and vision.

For more information about the ACT Board of Directors, visit www.actoronto.org/agm.



The ACT Team at AIDS Walk for Life Toronto

FUNK 'N' WALK RAISES OVER \$400,000

With a funky new theme, a new, shorter route, and a retro dance afterparty, AIDS Walk for Life Toronto raised over \$400,000 this September for ACT's programs and services for people living with and at risk for HIV/AIDS.

On Sunday, Sept. 16, over 90 registered teams, 1100 individuals, and over 6000 of their friends and supporters walked and cheered their way along Yonge, Bloor, and Church Streets, raising not just funds but awareness about HIV/AIDS.

"We were thrilled with the incredible enthusiasm and generosity of everyone who participated. We couldn't have asked for a better day," says Robb Walker, Chair of the AIDS Walk for Life Toronto Steering Committee.

This year's theme, Funk 'n' Walk, inspired outrageous and creative costumes among the walkers. DJ Sumation energized the crowd with beats and the Boogie Wonder Band played hits from the 70's at the post-Walk retro street party at Church and Carlton Streets.

"It's inspiring to see so many people walking towards one goal for so many different personal reasons – whether because they know

someone who is HIV-positive, have lost someone to AIDS, or are HIV-positive themselves," says Lori Lucier, Executive Director of ACT. "This year's event was fun and incredibly moving."

Iain McIlveen took home this year's Top Walker prize and Team Jessica won Top Team.

Congratulations to winners, and thank you to everyone who walked, cheered, and danced and thank you to all of our sponsors!



VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION PARTY

On September 25th, ACT staff, board, and volunteers gathered at Zippers for the fourth annual Volunteer Appreciation Party. Together we celebrated the enormous contribution volunteers make to the agency – over 45,000 hours every year, or the equivalent of 23 full-time staff positions.

Superstar diva Michelle Ross performed, DJ Black Cat provided the music, and stand-up comedian Maggie Cassella supplied the laughs.

Thanks to all our terrific volunteers for their dedication and hard work! Thanks, also, to the management and staff of Zippers, and to all of our fabulous entertainers.



Core Skills Training for Volunteers

Congratulations to everyone who completed the spring and fall 2007 Volunteer Core Skills Training programs. Offered in partnership with Toronto People with AIDS Foundation, this year's programs featured skills-building workshops on the basics of HIV/AIDS, cultural competency, needs assessment and referrals, and confidentiality. Everyone who volunteers with ACT's programs and services must pass this rigorous training. For information about our next Core Skills Training, in spring 2008, contact Sergio Martinez, Program Volunteer Coordinator, at smartinez@actontario.org or 416-340-8484 ext. 224.

Introducing ASO411 and the Positive Wellness Community Calendar

www.aso411.ca

Last year, ACT participated in the Toronto HIV/AIDS Community Planning Initiative (TCPI), a government-led initiative to improve the coordination of HIV/AIDS programs and services in the city. One of the TCPI's recommendations called for the development of an accessible, coordinated HIV/AIDS service information system. ACT, with other groups, was heavily involved in the working group tasked with this specific goal.

After looking at existing HIV/AIDS information tools – such as ACT's Living Guide Online, the Community Care Access Centre's Information and Referral System, and Findhelp Information Services' www.211toronto.ca – our working group decided to partner with the Ontario HIV Treatment Network (OHTN) to expand the scope of their ASO411 project.

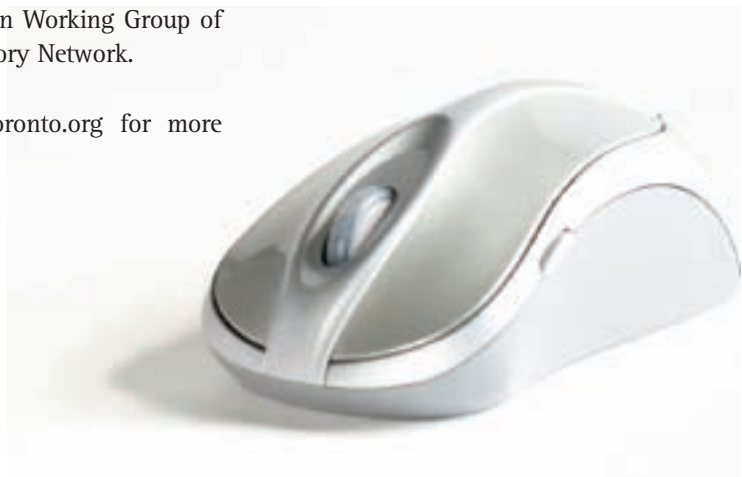
Rolling out over the next few months, the ASO411 website (www.aso411.ca) will supply service providers and individuals living with, and at risk for HIV/AIDS with accurate, up-to-date information about HIV/AIDS-related services in Toronto. This new web-based tool allows individuals to search online, using their street address, postal code, city, or intersection to find the services most useful to them, whether they are living with or at risk for HIV/AIDS.

This winter, ACT will launch its own, complementary “Positive Wellness Community Calendar,” an online events listing for people living with HIV/AIDS. The calendar will supplement ASO411 with timely information about HIV/AIDS-specific programs and services in Toronto.

The development of the “Positive Wellness Community Calendar” was supported by the Access to Information Working Group of the TCPI and the HIV/AIDS Wellness Advisory Network.

Check out www.aso411.ca and www.actoronto.org for more information about the projects.

“ASO411 connects people living with HIV/AIDS to the latest info about programs and services available to them in Toronto.”



ACT's Latest HIV Prevention Campaigns

Leading up to Pride Week in June, ACT launched Canada's first comprehensive safer oral sex campaign. Developed in response to rising rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) across Toronto, the Safer Oral Sex campaign targeted gay and bisexual men with practical information about safer blow jobs, rimming, and other forms of oral sex.

"We've seen a rise in STIs over the past several years, particularly among gay and bisexual men," says Rui Pires, Gay Men's Community Education Coordinator. "A lot of men are pretty savvy when it comes to safer sex, but not everyone realizes that STIs like syphilis can be passed on through oral sex – often without causing symptoms."

To ensure the campaign spoke to men in a voice they could relate to, ACT's Community Education Team reviewed reports from their bathhouse outreach volunteers and tested out several different ideas with focus groups.

"The focus groups were really helpful. They made it pretty clear that when it comes to reaching men in bathhouses and bars, a head-turning, sex-positive approach and a sense of humour would be great assets," Pires says.

The result was a suite of campaign posters, brochures, condom packs, and advertisements that coupled funny titles ("Use Your Head When Giving It," "Reading This Could Save Your Ass") with dark, sexy graphics. The campaign appeared in gay media such as *Xtra*, *fab*, *About*, and *GayGuideToronto.com*. Campaign materials were distributed at community venues and special events as well as through ACT's information boards and condom dispensers located in many gay venues. Ten thousand oral sex condom packs have been picked up to date.

More recently, ACT, Toronto Public Health, and Hassle Free Clinic launched the third phase of a citywide Syphilis education campaign in November. The campaign first launched in 2005 and targets gay and bisexual men.

"With this campaign, we wanted to make sure that men had all the basic facts about syphilis: That it's a lot easier to get and pass on than HIV, it doesn't always cause symptoms, and it can make men who are already HIV-positive very sick," says Duncan MacLachlan, Gay Men's Outreach Coordinator.



Unlike the previous two phases of the campaign, which promoted a testing blitz in community bathhouses and clinics, the third phase is a broad community appeal for men to get tested and treated. It rolled out across Toronto in the form of posters and condom inserts.

For more information about either the Safer Oral Sex or Syphilis campaigns, visit www.actoronto.org/oralsex and www.actoronto.org/syphilis.



ACT AT PRIDE 2007

Another year, another terrific Pride Day!

Designed by Luis de Castro, ACT's float in the 2007 Pride Parade won the Toronto Pride Committee award for "Best Celebration of the 2007 Theme (Unstoppable)."

The float, "Unstoppable Services," included great music courtesy of DJ Sumation and was followed by nearly a hundred ACT staff members, volunteers, clients, and supporters carrying signs promoting our programs and services and red chiffon ribbons.

Thanks to everyone who marched and to all of those who made the float such a great success! Thanks also to Teperman Demolition & Waste for their donation of the float truck.



Computer Lab Makeover

Thanks to donations from IBM and ACT volunteer Julie Biddle, as well as a grant from the Ontario Disability Support Program, the Employment Action program was able to renovate the ACT computer lab this year.

The computer lab re-opened on June 28 as a brighter, more user-friendly space for Employment Action clients to learn computer skills and prepare themselves to re-enter the workforce after periods of long-term disability.

Employment Action volunteers Julie Biddle, Pat Black, and Derek Yee contributed over 100 hours of work to the computer lab makeover, with ACT staff members Don Phaneuf, Grace Chiutsi, and Ned Lyttelton providing support. Thanks also to architect Patrick Fahn, who contributed his expertise for free.

More recently, on Nov. 28, the agency celebrated the arrival of new equipment from IBM. With IBM's generous support, Employment Action clients now have state-of-the-art hardware and software with which to hone their skills.

Every year Employment Action provides over 150 computer classes, résumé workshops, and other job training to PHAs. In the past year alone, Employment Action's team of 10 volunteer instructors provided 600 hours of instruction. With so much happening in the program, the computer lab makeover is a welcome change. Thanks to everyone who helped out!

“Every year, Employment Action provides over 150 classes, workshops and tutorials to people living with HIV/AIDS.”



ACT's New Computer Lab

Donor Profile: IBM


ACT relies on the generosity of countless individuals and corporations in the community to provide hope for our clients. As described earlier in this newsletter, IBM's generous renewal of the agency's computer training lab exemplifies corporate leadership and social responsibility.

IBM's donation of over \$21,000 of new equipment – including state-of-the-art desktop computers, LCD monitors, and laptop computers – will serve as an important tool for Employment Action's team of volunteer instructors as they provide PHAs with computer skills for gainful employment and personal development. In addition, these computers are plugged into the World Community Grid, a humanitarian effort whereby the idle processing power of personal and business computers around the world is used to crunch data for possible cures to HIV/AIDS, cancer, and to help address other global problems.

"IBM's donation is a continuation of our commitment to Employee Action, which began back in 2004," says Richard Branston, Account Executive (in the financial services sector) at IBM Canada. "IBM employees also believe in supporting our communities, and have contributed hundreds in volunteer hours and have donated more than \$66,000 since 1990 to the AIDS Committee of Toronto."

Thanks to the leadership and generosity of IBM, ACT can continue to empower PHAs with the tools and skills necessary to (re)enter and thrive in the workforce, and continue to provide compassionate, proactive services to the community.

For more information about Employment Action or to visit ACT and the IBM Training Room, please contact Don Phaneuf, Employment Consultant, at 416-340-8484 ext. 262. And for more information about how you or your company can help people affected by HIV/AIDS, please contact Anthony S. Tsoumbis, Development Officer, at 416-340-8484 ext. 279 or via e-mail at donations@actoronto.org.



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Thank you for your support, and happy holidays!