

# Vancouver/Richmond Health Board

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OCTOBER 23, 1997**

## **Action Plan to Combat HIV/AIDS in the Downtown Eastside**

### **Media Backgrounder**

The Vancouver/Richmond Health Board passed a motion on September 23rd declaring the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Downtown Eastside a public health emergency. The Board directed V/RHB staff to immediately develop a detailed action plan to respond to the problem, based on the report by Dr. Penny Parry as well as other reports including the Cain Report (September 1994) and the Area Medical Health Officer's Report to the Board (May 1996).

V/RHB staff consulted with community representatives and service providers to develop the action plan.

The immediate goal of the action plan is to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS amongst street-involved injection drug users, who live in or spend time in the Downtown Eastside, and those with whom they come into close contact.

The plan recommends the allocation of the \$3 million fund as well as the approval of an additional \$700,000 from the V/RHB's annual budget. The money will be disbursed as follows: \$1.5 million for outreach service enhancement, \$1.0 million for substance abuse service enhancement, \$500,000 for community development and evaluation, \$500,000 for additional health services by V/RHB nursing staff in the Downtown Eastside, and \$200,000 for staff training and education.

### **Action Plan Highlights**

#### **Immediate actions**

The Action Plan details immediate actions in three key areas.

#### **Improving Access to Health Services**

- By November 1st, increase needle exchange sites from one fixed site and the mobile van service to five fixed sites and enhanced mobile coverage. The new needle exchange sites will be: Downtown South Community Health Centre;

Mount Pleasant Youth Clinic; Downtown Clinic; North Health Unit; Pine Clinic. Needles will be exchanged on a one-for-one basis, and bleach disinfectant and condoms will also be available.

- By December 1st, add 20 full-time outreach worker positions to the staff currently providing counselling, education and support at five Downtown Eastside locations.
- By December 1st, add 14 full-time positions to ten programs, which provide substance abuse services.
- By December 1st, expand community nursing services by eight full-time positions to provide more primary care as well as prevention services.
- By December 1st, extend service hours at eight drop-in centres and clinics: Lookout, the High Risk Project, Urban Native Health, Strathcona Mental Health Team, Vancouver Native Health, Downtown Eastside Youth Activities Society, Women's Information and Safe House, and Drug and Alcohol Mothers Support.

### **Improving Testing and Medical Protocols**

Improving testing and medical protocols is essential to early detection of HIV. Early detection will enable health professionals to treat HIV positive individuals more quickly to reduce their viral count and to counsel them on changing behaviors that put other people at risk. To provide leadership in this area and to ensure that the Board receives the best medical advice available, an Epidemiology Surveillance and Research Review Committee is being convened. The Committee will be chaired by Dr. Michael O'Shaughnessy, Executive Director of the Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. The committee will examine the following areas:

- Review the testing protocols for HIV/AIDS. Currently, full blood tests are taken and analyzed. However, other provinces conduct HIV/AIDS blood tests by a finger-prick method, which allows for easier, more frequent testing and leads to earlier detection.
- Explore the advisability of making HIV/AIDS a reportable disease. This would enable the Health Board and other health professionals to track the disease more effectively.
- Establish protocols and guidelines for clinical trials as a means of improving the effectiveness of drug therapies.

### **Working in Collaboration with all Three Levels of Government, the Community, and Other Organizations**

- The Board Chair is currently engaged in talks with the Ministry for Children and Families for the transfer to the Vancouver/Richmond Health Board of all drug and alcohol related programs and funding currently administered by the Ministry for Children and Families for the Downtown Eastside.
- By November 1st, begin working with the Ministry of Health and the College of Physicians and Surgeons to establish a community-based methadone maintenance program.
- By November 1st, begin working with regional health boards to address the problems of injection drug use and HIV/AIDS throughout the Lower Mainland.

### **Longer term strategies to address the broader determinants of health**

- Work with BC Housing, other provincial ministries, and the City of Vancouver to develop housing for Downtown Eastside residents.
- Start immediately with a renewed sense of partnership to work with the City and the Ministry for Children and Families on creating additional detox and treatment programs.
- Begin working on social planning issues with City of Vancouver and the police department.
- By December 15th, develop a plan to distribute nutritious food to Downtown Eastside residents.
- By December 15th, develop a transportation plan for Downtown Eastside residents to access services outside of the area.
- Ensure HIV/AIDS education is included in the school health curriculum.

### **Additional funding through the Continuing Care Program**

Through the Continuing Care Program of the Vancouver/Richmond Health Board an additional \$950,000 will be directed to this area:

- \$700,000 to the Dr. Peter Foundation to fund 10 hospice beds. This commitment will provide physical and emotional care to individuals with AIDS in the last months and weeks of their lives;
- \$250,000 for additional home care service for the Downtown Eastside, including enhanced services for the new Portland Hotel.