

Vancouver/Richmond Health Board

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VANCOUVER/RICHMOND HEALTH BOARD ACTION PLAN TO COMBAT HIV/AIDS IN THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

The Vancouver/Richmond Health Board this evening took strong action to combat HIV/AIDS in the Downtown Eastside and approved the allocation of \$3.7 million to implement a new plan.

"Getting health services to the Downtown Eastside residents who need them – that's our number one priority," says Ron Yuen, past chair of the Health Board. Yuen presented the action plan to the board, which in September declared the epidemic a public health crisis and demanded action.

Vancouver has the highest known rate of HIV among injection drug users in the Western world. This is attributed to the intense geographical concentration of homeless people in the area as well as an increase in cocaine use as opposed to heroin use (cocaine users inject more frequently than do individuals using other drugs, increasing the risk of passing on the virus through needle sharing). These two factors are heightened by poor access to services for people most at risk for spreading HIV/AIDS.

Now that the board has approved the action plan, says Yuen, immediate steps will be taken to curb the epidemic, and longer term strategies will deal with the underlying causes of HIV/AIDS in the Downtown Eastside.

Specifically, as of November 1st, the Board will increase the number of needle exchange sites from one fixed site and the mobile van service to five fixed sites and enhanced mobile service. Needles will be exchanged on a one-for-one basis, and bleach disinfectant and condoms will also be available.

The plan states that community outreach services to the highest risk populations - women, youth, the mentally ill and Aboriginal people - must increase if the epidemic is to be curbed. To that end, 20 additional outreach workers will be hired to work at six existing programs; extended service hours will be offered at eight drop-in centres and health clinics; and 14 additional full time workers will be hired at ten existing programs to provide more substance abuse services. In addition, community nursing staff will increase by eight full-time positions.

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Another immediate strategy is to get expert medical advice on dealing with the disease, says Yuen. "To that end, the Board will establish an Epidemiology Surveillance and Research Review Committee, which will be chaired by Dr. Michael O'Shaughnessy, director of the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS." Yuen says the committee's first priority will be to report back on changing the testing protocols for HIV/AIDS. "Testing for this disease is not done under ideal conditions because the people they are working with are often on the streets. The HIV/AIDS test needs to be easy to administer, efficient, and the results need to be available quickly."

Yuen says the epidemiology committee will also explore the reportability of HIV/AIDS, making it as easy as possible to track the disease.

Bud Osborn, a director of the Health Board who lives in the Downtown Eastside, also cites poverty as a contributing factor in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. "Income assistance rates have been cut back so much that people can barely afford even inadequate housing – and they certainly can't afford to move out of the area," he says.

There is very little incentive for people to change their lifestyle when they can't afford a place with a fridge and a hotplate, or even bedding and proper food, adds Osborn. He says that the Board's action plan includes working with the three levels of government and the community to address poverty and other determinants of health such as housing and transportation.

In addition to the \$3.7 million identified in the HIV/AIDS action plan, the health board will be allocating \$700,000 to fund ten beds at the Dr. Peter Foundation hospice, and \$250,000 to increase home care services in the Downtown Eastside, including at the Portland Hotel. ✓

Since the board declared the HIV/AIDS epidemic a public health crisis last month, says Yuen, organizations and individuals have really come onside. "I know that by working together within the board's framework, we'll have a positive impact in the Downtown Eastside very soon."