



HIV COMMUNITY LINK
ANNUAL REPORT 2016/2017

Some highlights of our programming this year:

- Development of our Peer Program, which creates peer mentoring and support relationships amongst those living with HIV
- Our HEAT program delivers HIV prevention and sexual health education to the LGBTQ community, engaging people in their environments, including online outreach, testing clinics, community venues and events
- As a leader in harm reduction services, HIV Community Link has continued to respond to the opiate overdose crisis in both Calgary and Medicine Hat, through our Take Home Naloxone program and community-based needs assessment for supervised consumption services
- Engaging Indigenous communities through outreach, case management and access to traditional healing practices, our Strong Voices program endeavours to support individuals in their path to wellness

Letter from Leslie Hill,
Executive Director and Mike
Peters, Board Chair

seeking new revenue, reducing operational costs and focusing on our priority programs and services.

There are approximately 80,000 people living with HIV in Canada, and the rate of HIV in Alberta has risen over the past year to 6,900 known diagnoses. While we have come so far in the treatment of HIV, there remains pervasive stigma and fear associated with the illness. It impacts perception of people living with HIV, willingness to get tested, and even access to life saving treatment.

This year, our team has provided thousands of hours of education, outreach and support to allow people to make more informed choices about their health. This means helping people to prevent transmission through promotion of preventative practices in sexual health, handing out life-saving naloxone kits, supporting those living with HIV and hepatitis C to achieve their personal wellness goals, and addressing the stigma associated with HIV which impacts willingness to get tested and access treatment.

Over the past year, one of the most critical issues emerging in our work has been the opiate overdose crisis. People who inject drugs are at a greater risk of acquiring HIV and hepatitis C, and are currently at significant risk of death by overdose. This crisis has been likened to the AIDS epidemic, with a sharp rise in numbers and similar experiences of fear, misinformation and stigma.

We have continued tailoring our programs to prevent and reduce harm through evidence-based and promising practices in Calgary and southeastern Alberta. HIV Community Link hosted events like Splash of Red and the Scotiabank AIDS Walk to raise awareness and critical funds for our work. These events helped HIV Community Link to engage the public and our stakeholders, including people living with or at risk for HIV and hepatitis C, donors, volunteers, government, and community leaders, in ending the stigma associated with HIV.

This stigma is the cornerstone of our work, and is why we adopt a harm reduction framework for all of our work. This approach is inclusive and non-judgmental, creating opportunities for relationships and supports that promote wellness for individuals and communities affected by HIV and hepatitis C.

Congratulations to the staff and to all the volunteers for making 2016-2017 a successful year for HIV Community Link. Thank you to all the funders, donors and sponsors. We hope that we will continue working together in the year to come, empowering choices, engaging communities and ending transmission!

A significant challenge we have experienced this year is a loss of funding as a result of shifting priorities in the United Way of Calgary and Area investment strategy. Our strategy to reduce the impact of this loss includes three priorities:



HIV Community Link provides non-judgmental, compassionate and confidential support for people living with or affected by HIV. We provide access to information, resources, and referrals.

Our Calgary office is the base from which we offer our HIV support programs. Over the past year, our Calgary team has worked tirelessly to bring holistic, client-led support services to people living with HIV and hepatitis C. Services provided during this period have included coordination of basic needs such food, clothing, and shelter, and supportive counselling and referral to appropriate community and health based resources.

In this period, we have also developed a Peer Program. Research demonstrates peer-based programming as promising in engaging hard to reach populations and changing behaviour through role modelling, especially for people who are diagnosed with HIV.

Our numbers for this year include:

- 1620 contacts with 140 registered clients
- 745 hours of direct one-on-one support
- 26 Friday Lunches with 744 contacts in total

SHIFT

Shift provides support services to adults currently and formerly working in the sex industry to improve their quality of life and achieve individualized goals. Shift's services will meet our clients where they are at – whether they want to continue sex work, leave the industry, or anything in-between.

Almost 300 people are currently registered in the Shift program. Services offered in the reporting period include supportive counselling and case management, free safer sex supplies, sexual health information and referrals, and opportunities for peer and social support. Shift also distributes "Bad Date" sheets, which promote safer working conditions and has offered trainings to build the capacity of community members and service providers to support sex workers. During this year, we also launched an Advisory Committee comprised of specialists and people currently and formerly working in the sex industry, to inform our programs and services.

- 5,732 total contacts served in 2016
- 44% increase in number of clients accessing Shift since 2013
- 684 counseling hours provided to registered clients

HIV Community Link provides confidential and empathetic support to people affected by HIV and hepatitis C, in Medicine Hat, Brooks and the surrounding area. Our staff receive the clients in a non-judgmental setting and help guide them to resources that will be of most use to them in their unique situation.

Medicine Hat

Over the last year, we provided face-to-face in-person support through counselling, outreach and drop in support at the Medicine Hat Cares Centre. We also distributed safer injection supplies and safer sex supplies, effective tools for preventing transmission.

We continued to provide referrals to appropriate service agencies that support client mental health, social and basic needs. In this period we provided:

- 778 hours of one-on-one support, case management and supportive counselling
- 2,489 client contacts with people who use drugs
- 242,673 needles to clients accessing our harm reduction supplies

Overdose Prevention Program

In Medicine Hat, we offer overdose prevention training and access to life-saving take-home naloxone kits to people who use drugs, friends, family, and service providers. This service teaches people how to reduce the risk of overdose, and how to recognize the signs of an overdose and respond, ultimately decreasing the number of overdoses and death by overdose in the community.

- 289 kits since the inception of the program in 2015
- 33 overdose reversals reported
- 502 service providers and students trained

Brooks

Our Brooks program offers a variety of HIV prevention and education services and access to free safer sex supplies for the Brooks community.

In this period, new partnerships have been established for service delivery including the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Brooks Catholic School Board, Alberta Health Services Addictions and Mental Health, and the Bassano Rural District School Board.

- 21 training sessions/workshops
- 315 priority populations and allied service providers trained
- 33 key contacts have been established with other organizations



Cheryl's Story

The first thing you realize when you talk to Cheryl is that she adores her kids. "I was born here in Calgary and raised here, been here all my life. I have three wonderful kids, but I am not allowed to see them. The court feels that, because I am a transgender woman, it would cause psychological damage to them," Cheryl tells me with a soft and sad voice. She is tall and timid, and really happy she has a safe place to come to almost every day.

Cheryl has been a Shift client for almost three years. "I had a severe depression and I ended up being suicidal. After my third attempt, they put me in the hospital and I was there for four months. When I got out, I had nothing; my breastplates were gone, my belongings were gone, everything was gone; so I got out of the hospital and I was living on the street. To be precise, I was living in my van and I was working the stroll in Forest Lawn," says Cheryl. It was then that somebody gave her a card for Shift.

The first time Cheryl came out as a transgender woman, living her life as a female was 15 years ago. She was taking hormones and getting ready for surgery, when she hooked up with a woman she met at a party. A couple of weeks later, the woman showed up at Cheryl's door, informing her that she was pregnant. Recognizing she was about to become a parent, Cheryl realized that she had to choose between either pursue her dream as a woman or being part of her child's life. "I wasn't allowed both, so I picked my child," says Cheryl. She had to put everything on hold. Years later, in consultation with her psychiatrist, she decided to continue her pursuit of her real identity and re-embarked on her journey of transition into life as a woman.

Twelve years had passed with her playing the role of being a man. And the transition hasn't been easy. "Being a transgender woman, I don't fit in with the, I guess you want to call them the 'straight crowd' and I don't fit in with the gay, lesbian or bisexual crowd, so kind of just hover in the centre.", which is why the safe and nonjudgemental support of the Shift program means so much to her.



When Cheryl got the Shift card, she needed a couple of weeks to get in touch with the agency. "The support counsellor here was very understanding and she didn't condemn me or anything for what I was doing. I told her I had no money so I'm doing what I have to do to at least eat. Next thing I knew, there was a lady from the Canadian Mental Health Association that came in, and the Shift counsellor asked me if I would please talk to her. So I sat down and we talked, and all of a sudden I had a place to live. When I moved in, I owned nothing. The only thing I had was two short dresses. That was all I owned, and I talked with the Shift counsellor some more and next thing I know she called an agency; they show up and I got all of these clothes, and **I just felt wonderful that I had someone there that actually cared,**" adds Cheryl.

"I honestly don't know. If it wasn't for that lady from Shift walking up to me and giving me that card, I don't know what would have happened to me. Honestly it's been nothing but support and they help me with even the littlest things, like in wintertime when you don't have a jacket. When I don't have anything to eat, they give me food, and the nicest thing about all of it is they don't condemn me. I tell them that sometimes money is so tight, I have to go back out and work, and they don't condemn me for it, they just tell me "you have to be safe," says the tall woman with the softest voice. She adds that it's wonderful to have an organization that supports her.

Cheryl doesn't hesitate when asked if she has a message for the other transgender people out there. "Don't give up, don't give up, as hard as it is, as lonely as it is, you can come to a place like Shift and you have someone that will stand beside you and will help you and me."

PREVENTION AND EDUCATION

The success of the Prevention and Education team lies in its population-specific education, prevention, capacity building and community development programs. In this period, we provided 44 trainings to 711 allied professionals. These trainings were offered in post-secondary faculties and departments including Social Work, Nursing, Medicine, Women's Studies and Anthropology, as well as certificate programs for Addictions Counselling and Working with Homeless Populations.

In the last year, a key focus for the Prevention and Education team was policy and advocacy work to build awareness of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), a medication that reduces the risk of HIV transmission. We provided one-on-one support to almost 40 individuals regarding access to PrEP. At the same time, we actively participated in CanPrEP, a national working group on PrEP knowledge exchange, advocacy, approval and access lead by the Canadian Action Treatment Council (CTAC).

HEAT

The HEAT program provided access to HIV, hepatitis C and other STI education, awareness and prevention services for gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM).

HEAT continues to play a leadership role in a number of community collaboratives. In this way we are able to ensure that awareness of intersecting vulnerabilities for MSM is understood by community partners and service providers. Highlights of our collaborative work in this period is the appointment of the HEAT Coordinator to a second term as co-chair of the Alberta Health Services' Sexual and Gender Diversity Advisory Group (Calgary Zone), a presentation on PrEP for the Totally Outright program led by Calgary Sexual Health Centre, a presentation on HIV in the MSM community for Queers on Campus, the University of Calgary's LGBTQ student alliance and education sessions for the Calgary Outlink Between Men group.

- 884 direct contacts with gay & MSM
- 201 online outreach sessions
- 52,936 condoms distributed
- 42 HIV testing clinics in partnership with Safeworks, reaching 194 MSM

Strong Voices

Strong Voices is a culturally informed outreach and support program. Our goal is to build wellness through cultural knowledge, participation and identity, while reducing risk and addressing immediate needs for Indigenous communities. Strong Voices makes connections with vulnerable people through street outreach and

- 1,027 Indigenous contacts
- 151 outreach sessions
- 11 Sweatlodge Ceremonies

Drumbeat

Drumbeat helps tackle stigma and remove barriers to accessing resources, addressing HIV in the African, Caribbean and Black (ACB) communities, and supporting better access to HIV testing and services.

In this period, Drumbeat held an annual forum to further engage community and receive input on strategic goals and initiatives, successfully launched "In the African Kitchen" – a peer-based social support group for African Women affected by HIV, and presented at a special session at the Canadian Association for HIV Research (CAHR) Conference, representing our role as a regional hub for the Canadian HIV/AIDS Black, African and Caribbean Network (CHABAC). Additional highlights of our work include:

- 2,085 contacts in the ACB community
- 30 trainings reaching 805 individuals at immigrant service organizations, community meeting places such as barber shops and private business, and community organizations such as cultural associations and churches.
- 5 Brothers Chats events reaching 128 ACB community members/
- 107 outreach sessions

accepts registered clients for ongoing support. This year, Strong Voices worked with 41 clients, addressing individualized needs such as crisis support, housing, employment, access to treatment and health services and interpersonal relationships. Strong Voices has continued to build partnerships and raise awareness through special events and collaborations with various organizations. We organized 11 Sweatlodge ceremonies, facilitated by an Elder, with clients from Fresh Start Recovery Centre, the Salvation Army's Centre of Hope, the Alex Youth Centre, and Simon House Recovery Centre. Strong Voices also provided several HIV-related educational trainings to Sunrise Native Addictions and Siksika Health Services.

Brett's Story

Brett is almost 50 and was born on a reservation in Alberta. His story is about surviving the impacts of the legacy of colonization and intergenerational trauma, along with the stigma he carried for himself around being a gay man.

Brett describes a childhood of turmoil and abuse. Living on a reserve in Alberta, his parents were divorced when he was little, thrusting the family into chaos and instability. Brett and his three siblings were moved from one foster home placement to the next. "Some of the homes we went into were very horrible, we were severely abused, like locked downstairs and fed leftovers. By the time I was 17, I was on my own," says Brett. He caught a bus to California and started school there. While Brett managed to graduate high school, it wasn't easy. "There wasn't a bed of roses down there. I was mentally and physically abused by one of my relatives. I don't know how I made it through school, but I did," says Brett, adding that his faith in God has helped him through his tough times.

After this experience, Brett got involved with religious group which he describes as almost like a cult. "The only good thing that came out of that was that we completely stayed away from alcohol and drugs. Even in that sacred circle, the abuse continued," Brett says. "I had never accepted myself for being gay to the point where I was totally closed off in my own little world. It was so hard, like a mountain I had to climb".

Desperate to cope with his feelings of stigma and shame, Brett turned to alcohol in his late 20's. Brett describes how the alcohol "worked" for a while, Brett says, but another tragedy would come. He lost both his mother and sister in car accidents, two weeks apart. Brett pauses. "I almost went crazy. Somehow, I continued on. I got upset with God for a while then."

After losing his mother and sister, he moved back

to Calgary. He started to drink again and travelled to Edmonton whenever he needed to escape from Calgary and from his own stigma. During one of his trips to Edmonton, he acquired HIV. In early 2000, he got tested and got the diagnosis. "I refused to take the medication for about a year. I just blocked it out," Brett explains.

Once again, Brett found the strength to carry on. He started coming to HIV Community Link, but because of his fear and stigma, he would only use the back door, where the staff would meet him with food or other essential items because he would not come into the space. "I was still in that back corner; I just didn't know how to deal with it. I would phone ahead if I needed bus tickets or a food hamper, they would always give it to me through the back door," continues Brett.

It took Brett more than five years to use the front door at HIV Community Link. He finally did it after getting support from a psychologist who helped him overcome his feelings of shame "I knew that day would come," adds Brett. "Coming to this place has really helped me. I had to be around other people with HIV, I got to know the staff here, which was always great, they helped me 100%. Now, I just look forward to coming here."

Even though his family still doesn't know he is HIV positive, Brett finds meaning in the name of our Indigenous program, "Strong Voices". He wants to be a voice for other Indigenous people. He is getting ready to go to a conference for people living with HIV. "I don't care anymore if anybody knows, life is too short, and I just want to make a difference. I want to be a strong voice and be able to get up and talk and share my story, that it's OK." He also wants to help other people who are starting a similar journey. "Medication has really changed; you can live a healthy life for decades, but you have to bring yourself together mentally, physically and spiritually. At least that's how I made it."

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Volunteers

HIV Community Link has so many passionate and amazing volunteers who are key to the success of our organization. This year we focused on strengthening our volunteer program, developing new and exciting ways for people to get involved, streamlined recruitment and onboarding processes, and creating opportunities to recognize the commitment and dedication of our volunteers!

Volunteer opportunities are varied: from participation on our Board of Directors to joining our monthly volunteer activity nights there are many meaningful ways for people to get involved. Our volunteers are the backbone of our signature events and inform program development through our Advisory Committees. This year, we are thrilled to have the support of our weekly Administration and Food Bank Driver volunteers who are helping to meet our organizational needs and to assist our clients in meeting their nutritional needs. We are continuously grateful for everything that our volunteers bring to HIV Community Link every time they come into our office or join us at one of our events.

- 173 volunteers in total and 73 new
- 2297 volunteering hours

Events

We have seen an increase in participation in our signature events this year, with support from members of the government, guests and attendees, donors and sponsors, and wonderful volunteers supporting our efforts to raise awareness and funds for our cause.

Thank you for all you did to help us create success through our events!

- Splash of Red 2016 raised \$60,005 and gathered 200 guests
- Scotiabank Aids Walk raised \$80,587 and had over 250 participants
- Community Voices saw Calgary Men's Choir, One Voice and Luminous Voices bring their voices together with 80 participants in celebration of World AIDS Day
- 3rd party fundraising events raised over \$20,000

Communications and Media Relations

This year, HIV Community Link continued to raise awareness of the issues surrounding HIV and hepatitis C through active engagement with the media. With recognized leadership in HIV, hepatitis C, sex worker and overdose prevention issues, we have been called upon to tell our story in newspapers, radio and television.

A new initiative in this period was our Calgary Pride Festival campaign, "Whatever You Call it, Wear it With Pride". Posters for the campaign promoted the use of condoms, an effective tool in the STI and HIV prevention toolbox. The idea behind this bold campaign was put together by a team of three creative people from Evans Hunt who donated their talents and time for this pro-bono project.

- 40 media interviews and articles
- 406,664 daily total reach on Facebook and 473,200 impressions on Twitter
- 20 blog entries and 22 newsletters



Leah's Story

Leah has been volunteering with HIV Community Link for over a year. She is 33 years old and she is a registered nurse. "I took a special interest in sexual health. I was pointed towards HIV Community Link and I thought I would enjoy it, and I have. I have worked in sexual transmitted infections in Sydney, Australia, and was a part of a research study on rapid testing. HIV has its share of stigma and I wanted to continue my work to break down the stigma. Having given a few HIV diagnoses myself, I felt really moved by doing this work," says Leah describing her connection with the cause.

"I really enjoy working with the organization. I've made some good connections with the staff there, I feel recognized as a volunteer, and it's definitely something I want to continue doing. I would strongly encourage people to volunteer with agencies that they feel are doing something good. **It brings a lot of positivity in my life**, I've met really wonderful people and it's been a lovely experience. It's nice to just give back when you know you can."



Meet the Acorns

For the Acorns, as they like to call themselves, it all started with a T-shirt more than 10 years ago. Their daughter had volunteered in India for an organization that was helping and working with people living with HIV and when the man who was running this organization came to visit them in Calgary, he was wearing a T-shirt that read "I am HIV positive", meaning he was positive about a cure being found for HIV. He went to get in a taxi and the driver refused to take him saying "no HIV in my taxi". Having such a good friend treated in this way, the Acorns then realized the stigma around HIV and wanted to help out here, in Canada.

They connected with HIV Community Link, wanting to donate to a specific program. They started supporting the Christmas Hamper and they have been doing it since. With a small donation at first, but later, they have become the main donors for the program, with \$15,000 donated last year alone. "We are funding a number of groups here in Calgary, and you are the longest group we have funded on an annual basis," says Mr. Acorn.

But even with such a generous donation, they decided to donate anonymously. "I am

volunteering for the organization and I don't want the people there to know that I'm a donor. I don't want that to change the relationship with staff and clients and compromise the friendship that I've built throughout the years with them, which I think would happen if they knew I was a donor," says Mrs. Acorn.

"I feel every day so blessed for what I have," she continues, talking about how some people don't realize how important is to have a good health and a good life. **"If you have so much yourself and you feel good, boy, do you feel good when you're helping somebody else out."**

"The other part of the message is," adds Mr. Acorn, "that Calgary is still a very wealthy community, despite the recent economic downturn, but unfortunately there are more people than we realize in this community who do not benefit from its economic wellbeing. They do need help. Providing that is probably the best way to say thank you for the benefits of being in this community. We have been here for 40 years and Calgary has treated us very well and we feel that one way we can repay that is by helping the people within our community who have not experienced the benefits that we received."

Supporters:

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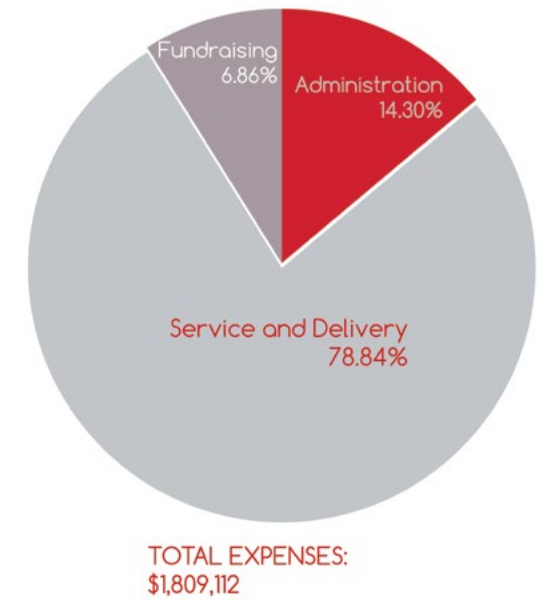
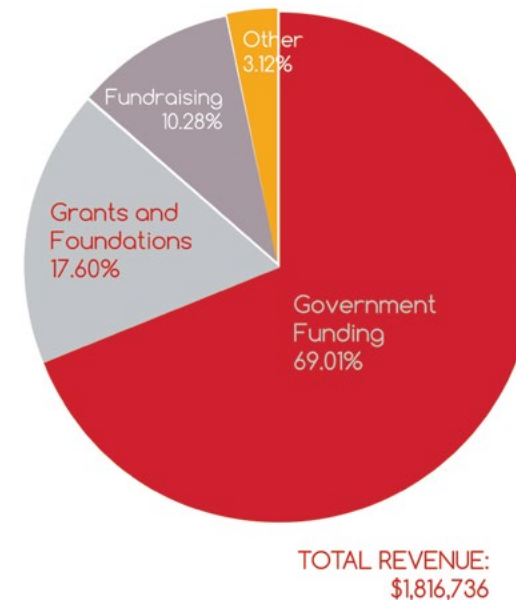
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HIV Community Link promotes wellness for individuals and communities affected by HIV and hepatitis C through prevention, education and support.

Our vision is: Empowering choices. Engaging Communities. Ending transmission.

CALGARY

Hours: Monday – Friday 9am to 4pm

Phone: (403) 508-2500 or 1 (877) 440-2437 (toll free)

Fax: (403) 263-7358

Address: 110 – 1603 10 Ave SW, Calgary AB, T3C 0J7

MEDICINE HAT

Hours: Monday – Friday 9am to 4pm

Phone: (403) 527-5882

Address: 356 – 2 St SE, Medicine Hat, AB, T1A 0C1

BROOKS

Phone: (403) 376-6020

Address: PO Box 331, Brooks, AB, T1R 1B4

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