



**New HIV cases  
in Vancouver in 2008:  
62% gay men**

Page 13

**BASHED ON A BUS**

Where was transit security?

Page 7



**DAVIE ST PARTY**

Pride questioned at AGM

Page 14



**DEMON VOICE**

Intimacy takes many forms

Page 21



# More than half of last year's new HIV cases in BC were gay men

So where is the funding for our prevention programs?



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DESIGN ANDREW TRAN

## COVER STORY

Nathaniel Christopher

**W**ITH GAY MEN accounting for more than half of all new HIV diagnoses in BC and their prevention programs already underfunded, the only organization focused specifically on gay men's health in the province will see its funding cut on World AIDS Day.

As part of a move to reduce the overhead and administrative costs of the approximately 300 agencies it oversees, the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority will cut seven percent (or about \$28,000) from the Health Initiative for Men's (HIM) budget Dec 1.

"We did have a budget shortfall this year," explains Vancouver Coastal Health spokesperson Anna Marie D'Angelo. "We did get more money than last year but it's not enough to cover operating cost. Our budget is 2.9 billion for this year and about 2.78 billion last year which is still not enough to cover wages, medical equipment, etc. We had a budget shortfall of 90 million which is a fraction of 2.9 billion."

Phillip Banks, outgoing executive director of the Health Initiative for Men, believes the funding cut will have a disproportionate impact on his organization and the community it serves.

"We believe that cutting funding to HIV contracts generally is problematic," says Banks. "However, cutting funding to the only significant gay men's HIV prevention contract when 62 percent of new infections are in the gay male population and when our current funding is so incredibly inadequate and disproportionate to the burden of disease... is shortsighted to say the least."

According to the BC Centre for Disease Control's 2008 report on HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, HIV rates in men who have sex with men in British Columbia increased from

1999 until 2004, then remained relatively unchanged from 2004 to 2008.

In contrast, the same study found that diagnoses among other groups, including heterosexual men and injection drug users, have decreased since 2004.

"We know that between one in six and one in seven gay men in our survey are HIV-positive," says Dr Mark Gilbert, a physician epidemiologist in the sexually trans-

Vancouver," says Gilbert.

Heterosexuals, in contrast, accounted for only 21.7 percent of new HIV diagnoses.

"We used to say one in 10 people is probably gay and now with better research it's about one in five," says Banks. "Even if you went to the older number of 10 percent and if you look at 62 percent of new infections are gay men, that's a huge

D'Angelo says gay men receive about half of the funding allocated to HIV prevention in Vancouver.

"The best estimate that I have is that within the VCH HIV/AIDS contracted services, roughly \$1.1 million goes specifically to community-based HIV prevention initiatives," she says. "Of this, about 50 percent is for initiatives specifi-

Vancouver's Community Based Research Centre (CBRC) says the few agencies that are addressing the issue are being stretched thin by limited resources.

"Not enough is being done," he says. "The supports we get from policy and from funding are inadequate for us to actually meet the challenge that's ahead of us."

Marchand says the federal government in particular has no interest in preventing HIV transmission among gay men. He says he submitted a grant application to Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq in February for the CBRC's Gay Men's Health Summit but never received her approval.

"Of all the proposals in the Pacific Region there were only two proposals for gay men," Marchand says. "One from HIM and one from CBRC. Both are sitting with the minister and all of the other HIV/AIDS proposals have been signed off on."

Despite repeated attempts to reach the minister, Aglukkaq did not comment by press time.

Marchand believes the federal government's disinterest in preventing HIV in gay men is rooted in prejudice.

"We hear examples of this across the country," he says. "There certainly is an attitude of homo-negativity. HIV/AIDS should be a bipartisan issue, it should be supported by all political parties. Especially with regards to prevention. But really we see time and time again this Conservative government and their inadequacy with this public health issue. It's hard to understand why they'd target gay men."

But it's not just up to government, says CBRC research director Terry Trussler. He believes that AIDS service organizations themselves need to be more responsive

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— Phillip Banks, former executive director of the Health Initiative for Men

mitted infections/HIV division of the BC Centre for Disease Control.

Granted, the survey was conducted in gay bars, festivals and bathhouses and the findings represent only the people sampled, not the entire gay community, Gilbert notes.

But the research shows that men who have sex with men represent more than half of all new HIV diagnoses in BC, and an even greater proportion of the number of new cases specifically in Vancouver, he says.

"What we know is that of new diagnoses in 2008, 179 new positive tests are MSM [men who have sex with men] which represent 51 percent of all new positive HIV tests in BC and 62 percent for

imbalance in terms of proportion of HIV infections that gay men represent. It's totally disproportionate."

Banks feels these numbers are a cry for immediate attention — and more funding, not less.

"I would say, in almost 30 years of HIV, gay men have consistently represented a significant proportion of people living with AIDS or people newly diagnosed with HIV. It's always been that way," he says.

"As such, in terms of funding, gay men should represent a relatively significant proportion.

"It just needs to happen. Right now at this point in time we may not need to represent 62 percent of the funding but we should represent a lot more than what we do."

cally for gay men. The bulk of this funding goes to the Health Initiative for Men, which VCH supported the development of last year, as a means to more concretely address community needs regarding HIV prevention."

It's not enough, Banks says. Too little is being done to prevent HIV transmission among gay men.

"I think if you look at what's being done to prevent HIV among gay guys in Vancouver, British Columbia and Canada you'll probably find that far too little is being done," he says, "and that's far too little in relation to other populations and, I think, it's far too little in prevention overall."

Rick Marchand agrees. The managing director of

# Pride Society to produce Davie St party in-house

Party profits questioned at annual general meeting

PRIDE

Shauna Lewis

**T**HE VANCOUVER Pride Society (VPS) announced at its annual general meeting Nov 7 that it will look to gay village bar owners to co-produce the Davie St Dance Party next year.

"Next year we are not putting it out to tender," says Ken Coolen, who has been appointed to a second term as VPS president. "We are doing it in-house."

Coolen says the VPS had hoped the event would be internally produced this year, but agreements couldn't be reached in time so the board contracted it out to John Donnelly & Associates to produce for the second year in a row.

Vince Marino, co-owner of the PumpJack Pub and the Junction Public House on Davie St, agrees there was not enough time for proper dialogue between the VPS and bar owners this year but thinks it's a "positive step" to include the bar owners in planning for next year.

Marino says his businesses will participate if early and thorough



CHRIS HOWEY PHOTO

**'SMOOTHEST TO DATE.'** Pride Society president Ken Coolen (left, with treasurer Bernard LeClair) in part credits the new paid Pride festival coordinator position for this year's successful event. The board will look at creating more paid positions, he says.

dialogue occurs between the VPS and bar owners.

This year the dance party generated over \$80,000 in revenue, most of which went to paying its operating costs, which Donnelly covered. When asked what return he got on his investment, Donnelly says, "Not quite enough to make it worthwhile, to tell you the truth."

Coolen says the VPS split the profits from the Davie St party equally with Donnelly. According to its financial statement, the VPS made only \$1,700 profit from the party in 2009. Donnelly says he made "under \$2,000" in profit after expenses as well, and says a report of all costs was provided to the VPS.

Coolen says the exact expenses

incurred to stage the street party are not in the VPS' financial statement "because we have contracted it out. This year we want it back in the books."

VPS member Jamie Lee Hamilton questioned revenues from a Pride party going to an outside producer rather than back into Pride and the community.

Calling for "complete transparency," Hamilton made a motion that in the future all third-party event producers contracted by the board must provide a report to the board which should then be available for membership to view at the AGM.

"I find this a little concerning that people want to see contracts at an AGM," countered VPS member and Qmunity executive director Jennifer Breakspear. "You've entrusted this board to do their job. I don't need to see every document," she said, adding that membership should have more trust in its board.

After some debate, Hamilton's motion passed with 11 members in favour and 10 opposed.

Coolen also announced that sponsorship levels were "record-breaking" in 2009 with more than \$120,000 generated.

He also guaranteed that events such as Eastside Pride and the Pride movie night would continue, despite being among some of the lowest revenue generators for the VPS.

The membership elected new directors-at-large, including Raigen D'Angelo, Chris Ellis, Hendrik van Harn, Raj Jagwani and Sandra Laframboise, who had become the seventh Pride direc-

tor to resign in six months when she left the board in May. At the time she said her resignation was spurred in part by two alleged incidents between herself and another board member.

"The issues from which I resigned have been resolved," Laframboise told Xtra West after the AGM.

"They wanted me on again and I accepted. I have a lot to offer. I enjoy working on the board and I have accomplished quite a lot," she said, adding that even through she had resigned she continued to work on VPS governance issues.

The membership also approved nominations for the vice president (Emily Sors), treasurer (Bernard LeClair) and secretary (Andrew Rutgers) positions on the board. Candidates were nominated at an internal nominations meeting in April.

The nominations meeting stems from a bylaw passed at the VPS' special general meeting Apr 4. Proposed amendments to other passed bylaws were also brought to the AGM and members approved governance changes including the requirement that all executive board positions, such as the vice president and treasurer, be screened and nominated in advance. Candidates must also declare that they have no criminal record.

Coolen says this year's Pride was "the smoothest to date" and partially credits the new paid Pride festival coordinator position. The board will look at ways it can create more paid positions, he says, but for now the VPS must take "small steps."

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Continued from page 13

to the needs of gay men.

"For a long time that money is going uselessly to AIDS organizations that don't do anything with gay men," he says. "They are essentially looking the other way or have marginalized gay men in their own organizations. They really are looking at the other populations that aren't at much risk for HIV."

"You could pretty much name every organization in the province that's dealing with AIDS — they are dealing with every other aspect of prevention aside from the one that is really dominant: gay men."

With sufficient attention and funding, other at-risk populations have seen declines in their rates of transmission, Banks notes.

He points, for example, to intravenous drug users.

Unlike gay men, the rate of HIV infection among intravenous drug users has steadily decreased over the last decade. Banks attributes the decline in part to a concerted effort on the part of the government and the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority.

"There are different theories about this but I think since about 1997 the provincial government, the federal government, the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority and the civic government have focused enormously on tackling the problem of HIV in the Downtown Eastside with things like injection sites. I think that's had

a tremendous impact," he says.

Currently, much of the focus in HIV is directed towards treatment.

Men who have sex with men are "the most significant target group" served by the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS' treatment programs, says director Julio Montaner. "Consequently they account for the largest proportion — over 60 percent — of the Centre's funding allocation."

But Banks believes that treatment is only one part of the equation and that prevention strategies must also be adequately addressed and funded.

"If you look at almost every culture or society across the planet we're much better at dealing with disease after than before," he says. "So if you're a politician or bureaucrat and have a limited amount of funding for disease do you spend it on someone who has it, or a program to prevent it?"

"It's more difficult to measure how the dollars are being spent in the short term rather than it is with care. If I gave you a thousand bucks you can tell me who received a service such as beds, medical care and doctors. If I gave you a thousand bucks for a prevention campaign, and asked you to do an HIV prevention campaign, how do you tell me how many people haven't got it?"

"It's a lot more challenging to see the impact of prevention than the impact of care."

Banks says the cost of treating people with HIV/AIDS is much higher than prevention.

"Forget the impact of lives, or

community, which is not measured in monetary terms. The cost of care outweighs the cost of prevention. That's a big cost, that's a major problem. But there seems to be a few people, whether in the bureaucracy or in government or other sectors, who are really committed to ending HIV in the gay community."

It's up to gay men to bring attention to this issue, Banks concludes.

"The only way that'll change is that gay men who vote, and people who love gay men who vote, apply pressure to politicians in their voting," he says.

"Part of what we expect is that gay men get funding to effectively prevent HIV — and sustain that funding until HIV no longer exists in the gay community, or new HIV infections no longer occur in gay male community."

For Marchand, a huge cornerstone of prevention lies in educating youth. The CBRC facilitates a program for young men aged 18 to 24 that includes 40 hours of training once a year.

"We have such a hard time trying to find money to fund that once a year," he says. "Just getting a youth program funded is difficult. It's a struggle every year."

Like Banks, Marchand believes it's up to gay men to make this issue a priority.

"Unless gay men are paying attention to this themselves it doesn't get done," he says.

"We have to be constantly vigilant and constantly addressing what our needs are. Nobody else is looking after our interests. And that's too bad."