



Stigma and discrimination are fuelling the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Canada

CALGARY, ALBERTA, January 26, 2005 – Reducing the stigma and discrimination related to HIV is the key to reducing the worst effects of the epidemic in Canada, the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network said today at the national launch of their Plan of Action for Canada to Reduce HIV/AIDS-Related Stigma and Discrimination.

“Federal and provincial governments in Canada have a legal obligation to ensure that the rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS are respected,” said Glenn Betteridge, Senior Policy Analyst at the Legal Network. “If they do not fulfill this obligation, they are allowing the stigma and discrimination related to HIV continue to worsen the impact of AIDS in Canada”.

The national campaign to implement this Plan of Action includes a 160-page report, an easy-to-read booklet, and an advocacy postcard, which calls on Prime Minister Paul Martin to implement the Plan. The 18 goals of the Plan, each with concrete action points, include:

- Improving participation of people living with HIV/AIDS and those vulnerable to the disease in all phases of planning and delivering HIV/AIDS programs and services;
- Investing significant resources in changing public attitudes toward HIV/AIDS, including better engagement of mass media;
- Ensuring that essential support services for people living with HIV/AIDS are well funded and well targeted;
- Improving awareness of human rights and mechanisms of redress when human rights are violated.

The plan of action was developed through a process of research, advice, and consultation with people living with and vulnerable to HIV from across Canada.

In spite of all that is known about the science of HIV/AIDS and about combating the epidemic, people living with HIV/AIDS still face stigmatization and discrimination every day. This keeps people living with HIV/AIDS out of the workforce and on the margins of society. Stigmatization and discrimination also prevents people living with HIV/AIDS from getting the health care and other services they need to stay healthy. Stigma and discrimination have their roots in misperceptions and under-information in the public mind, which also need to be addressed.

People living with HIV/AIDS are not the only ones who suffer from stigma and discrimination. Lisa Elford, Coordinator of AIDS Calgary's Equality Project said, "Groups of people linked with HIV/AIDS in the public mind - like intravenous drug users, gay men, sex workers, and people who come from countries where HIV/AIDS is widespread – also face stigma and discrimination". Elford continued "This stigma and discrimination stands in the way of people protecting themselves from being infected with HIV. It also prevents people from coming forward to get tested for HIV."

Le-Ann Dolan, representing the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network added, "Governments at federal, provincial, and municipal levels need to ensure that they are meeting their obligations under human rights law. The Plan of Action for Canada is a model for the actions that should be taken to meet these obligations".

The Plan of Action is available at www.aidslaw.ca, and copies can be ordered from the Canadian HIV/AIDS Information Centre at aidssida@cpha.ca or 1-877-999-7740.

A Plan of Action for Canada to Reduce HIV/AIDS-Related Stigma and Discrimination has been endorsed by these national organizations: the Canadian AIDS Society, the Canadian Association of Nurses in AIDS Care, **Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition**, and the United Church of Canada.

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The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca) is a national non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting laws and policies that respect and protect the human rights of people living with, and vulnerable to, HIV/AIDS.

AIDS Calgary Awareness Association (www.aidsalgary.org) is a local non-profit AIDS Service Organization that offers support services to individuals who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS and provides prevention and education throughout the Calgary region. AIDS Calgary's mission is to reduce the harm associated with HIV and AIDS for all individuals and communities in the Calgary region.