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# THE CONNECTION

## The Newsletter of Regional HIV/AIDS Connection

Serving Perth, Huron, Lambton, Elgin, Middlesex, and Oxford Counties

### LIVING OUR VALUE STATEMENT: THE COURAGE TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT

With entering 2018, I am heading toward 12 years with Regional HIV/AIDS Connection (RHAC). I have watched this dynamic organization evolve in ways I could not have imagined. At present, we are at the front line responding to the opioid crisis by providing Naloxone training and distribution. Naloxone saves lives and we have provided it to hundreds of vulnerable folks thus helping reduce incidents of death by opioid overdose. While Naloxone is a critical part of the overdose prevention response we at the front line know it is not enough.

At the time of crafting this message RHAC is working with Middlesex London Health Unit (MLHU), London Intercommunity Health Centre (LIHC) and other key partners to plan the launch of a Temporary Overdose Prevention Site (TOPS) in London. Through the focused efforts of MLHU London was quick to submit an application to a new provincial program supporting temporary OPS. By the time this newsletter is in the public realm this vital crisis response will be delivered from RHAC's location at 186 King Street.

RHAC's direct service delivery of TOPS is a natural fit for our organization as it draws upon our core strengths and competencies. For over 30 years, RHAC has been a known, respected and sought out leader in harm reduction services locally and beyond. Most important is our well established and trusting relationships with people who inject drugs. These members of the community trust our environment and the staff. On a daily basis we serve an average of 80 to 100 individuals within our Counterpoint Needle Syringe Program. Service users have come to count on our non-judgmental approach as we meet people "where they are at".

While TOPS is an urgent and vital response in the short term, the long view is to ensure that people who use drugs have easy access to Supervised Consumption Services (SCS). The intended SCS model will include wrap-around mental health, housing, and addiction services to ensure needs are addressed along the continuum.

While providing TOPS is in keeping with RHACs belief in "the courage to do what is right", I would like to share the perspective RHAC board member Dan Oudshoorn. He noted that it's important to "acknowledge people in Toronto and Ottawa who put themselves on the line and courageously opened overdose prevention sites without government approval, thereby saving lives and also helping to create a political climate conducive to the efforts" of others to follow.

Indeed this is true, Dan. We in London are fortunate to benefit from the courage of those who came before us!

In solidarity,

Brian Lester,  
Executive Director



Community Inspired. Courage Driven.

## LONDONERS WEIGH IN ON SUPERVISED CONSUMPTION SITES

Throughout the month of November 2017, the Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU) facilitated nine public consultation sessions on Supervised Consumption Sites (SCS) in every corner of the city. These sessions consisted of a presentation about the health crisis London is facing and how SCSs can be part of the solution. Participants were also able to provide feedback about the proposed service and the perceived impacts it could have on our neighbourhoods.

Five members of the RHAC Team contributed to the process by volunteering as facilitators at the public consultations. Attendance varied from two participants at one meeting, to over 100 at another.

Public consultations are an important early step in the lengthy application process of establishing SCSs as part of our continuum of Harm Reduction Services available to people who use drugs in our community.

## SUMMER FESTIVAL SEASON

Sunfest offered a bright start to our 2017 summer festival season. We have been privileged to attend this culturally-rich festival for the past 14 years, publicly educating, advocating, and raising awareness of HIV/AIDS in our community. Our messaging centered on the provincial "It Takes Courage" campaign developed by ACCHO (African Caribbean Council on HIV/AIDS in Ontario). Across the weekend, our staff and volunteers asked Londoners to tell us #WhatCourageMeans to them, and we were overwhelmed with their inspiring responses. We also continued to reach out to festival-goers with free educational resources and take-aways. In total, we provided: 11,000 condoms, 4,000 packets of lube, and 1,500 red ribbons to help Londoners get the summer festival season off to a great start!

RHAC was also thrilled to return for the Pride London Festival parade. For 2017, we chose one of our four guiding vision statements as our theme: Hope. It remains important to us that we not only reflect on the prouder and progressive moments in the LGBT2Q+ community, but that we also be mindful of what gives us hope for the future. In what has been a difficult year for queer communities, it also encouraged us to recommit to the struggles for equality and freedom that are ever present. Our staff remains dedicated to the fight against LGBT2Q+ discrimination and stigma. We are forever proud, and forever grateful to those who march with us.

We would also like to thank Pride London Festival for recognizing our John Gordon Home program with the 2017 Organization Contribution Award. It was an honour to receive the award and to celebrate the contributions of this past year's award recipients. We were also incredibly proud of our GBMSM and Youth Sexual Health Educator, Victor Feunekes, and their performance at Pride in Victoria Park!

Thank you for a fantastic festival season, London! We look forward to seeing you at Sunfest and Pride in 2018.



# WORLD HEPATITIS DAY 2017

It was a busy month for the Hep C team in the lead-up to World Hepatitis Day (WHD) on July 28th. Through a strong collaborative effort with community partners and the active engagement of peers living with Hep C, WHD 2017 was a huge success. We reached over 400 community members, referring more than a quarter of them to explore Hep C testing options. WHD events throughout the downtown area included: pavement chalk art encouraging Londoners to get tested and know their status, the handing out of 200 daisies as a vibrant symbol of Hep C awareness, and an information booth at Covent Garden Market with free information and take-aways (including water bottles, chapstick, information packs, and refreshments). Members of our Hep C peer team reported a positive experience interacting with the public, feeling proud to make a difference in people's awareness of Hepatitis C.

## *We would like to give a big thanks to:*

- Marsha Milliken for coordinating multiple events and community partners
- LIHC nurses for participating in a month-long testing campaign
- Jim Anderson Flowers for the 200 daisies handed out on World Hepatitis Day
- City of London for their donation of the City of London pins
- Kerry's Party for Less for donating green and black balloons to the cause
- Covent Garden Market for hosting our booth
- Unity Project, My Sister's Place, Ark Mission, YAC, London Coffee House, and JGH for hosting testing options
- OAHAS and MLHU for joining RHAC to help raise awareness!



## GIPA/MIPA: OUR COMMITMENT TO THOSE WE SERVE

RHAC hosted its 5th annual GIPA/MIPA ceremony in the gardens of John Gordon Home on July 11th. The ceremony opened with a musical introduction from our very own Victor Feunekes and featured guest speaker Chad Clarke. As with every year, staff lit the ceremonial candles and signed their names to acknowledge the Ontario Accord which supports the principles of the greater and more meaningful involvement of people living with HIV/AIDS. We do this every year to recommit to the understanding that the successful delivery of our mission relies on the active involvement and engagement of individuals living with HIV/AIDS, at all levels of the organization.





## CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF JOHN GORDON HOME

John Gordon Home had a lot to celebrate in 2017. This past year marked the 25th anniversary of JGH, as well as the second anniversary of its amalgamation with RHAC. We would like to thank everyone who



attended The Home with a Heart's summer barbecue for helping us to celebrate 25 years!

JGH also welcomed a very special summer visit from London North Centre MP Peter Fragiskatos who had the opportunity to tour the residence and meet our incredible summer students supported by the Canada Summer Jobs Program.

The year ended on a high note when Senior Director Bruce Rankin of John Gordon Home was surprised with a \$5,000 donation during his December invite to speak to



Gateway Church about the work we do. Thank you to the people of Gateway Church for your very generous support of John Gordon Home and its residents.

## THE RED SCARF PROJECT: SPREADING HIV/AIDS AWARENESS + STOPPING STIGMA

Our annual HIV/AIDS awareness campaign, The Red Scarf Project, continued to reach new heights in 2017, breaking down barriers and strengthening awareness in our community. In our official kick-off to AIDS Awareness Week, The Trews hit the stage at London Music Hall for our 2nd annual Red Scarf benefit concert, drawing out over 1,000 supporters. That's double the audience seen last year!

Over 1,800 red scarves were handcrafted and donated by community volunteers; totaling an estimated 9,000 volunteer hours! Each scarf was tagged and distributed to help raise HIV/AIDS awareness, challenge stigma, and provide a little extra warmth to our communities. We hosted 6 different Red Scarf Project pop-ups that allowed us to start positive conversations with thousands of local community members. Collectively, the Red Scarf 2017 campaign raised over \$25,000 to support some of the most marginalized people in our community through our free programs and services. Many of these life-saving and life-changing services would not exist without these fundraised dollars. These services include: our "Country Cupboard" food bank; counselling services and programming; weekly wellness, active living and support groups; stigma reduction programs related to HIV, Hepatitis C, and sexual orientation; a wellness assistance fund to help with medical needs, and transportation to and from medical appointments; transitional, respite and end of life care as well as advocacy for housing; and other practical supports.

We are so thankful for the outstanding community support of the Red Scarf Project from all of our community knitters, volunteers, friends of the agency, community partners, and sponsors. Please visit us on Facebook to see our album of supporter pictures & posts. With much gratitude, we would like to thank our 2017 Red Scarf benefit concert sponsors, including: FM96 (Corus Entertainment), Harrison Pensa, McCormick, Scotiabank, The London Free Press, Skrypnik Group, General Dynamics Land Systems—Canada, ECS Cares Incorporated, McFarlan & Rowlands Insurance Brokers Inc., Patrick's Beans, Best Western Plus Lamplighter Inn, Oliver & Associates Employee Charity Fund, Union Gas, Dancor, Daniel Kelly Wealth Management, and Lexcor Business Lawyers LLP. A special thanks goes out to key community partners such as the City of London and Mayor Matt Brown, London Music Hall, Covent Garden Market, Citi Plaza, London Local Gift Co., The Bray Family & The Memory Walkers, Lilka Young, John Hassan, Middlesex-London Health Unit, EatDrink Magazine, Andrew Rosser and Pride London Festival, Kathleen Holland, Western Dignitas, Dr. Lisa Jakubowski and Brescia University College School of Leadership & Social Change, Moxie's Bar & Grill - London, Micha's Place, TD and GOPride London, Dan Knight and the Change Makers, and TOAST London. We also increased our regional reach and participation with the help of various partners including Perth District Health Unit, Laurie Krempien-Hall, and Revel Café in Stratford, as well the Health Units in Lambton and Huron Counties.







## REMEMBERING, HONOURING, AND CELEBRATING

Our annual World AIDS Day Vigils took place in both London (Dec 1st) and Stratford (Nov 30th), once again bringing our community together to remember, honour and celebrate those we have loved and lost, even as we look forward with hope for a cure. Thank you to Trinity United Church and Community of Christ church in Stratford for graciously hosting our vigils. A special thanks to Mood & Co. for donating eight specially-made candles to our 2017 vigils.

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM OUR ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

This year's Annual General meeting was held on September 7th at the London Civic Gardens Complex. It was a beautiful and well-attended evening, with our membership coming together to review our activities and finances from the 2016 fiscal year. An emotionally powerful highlight of the evening was the address from our guest speaker Karin, a former harm reduction client who shared about the important transitional role RHAC services played in the health and wellness she enjoys today. In closing she powerfully reminded us all that "where there is a heartbeat, there is hope." Our 2017 honor roll inductees included Sister Nancy Wales (Sisters of Saint Josephs), and Dennis Winkler (Wink's Eatery). Long-serving staff recognition awards went out to Brian Lester and Mike Joudrey for 10 years of consecutive service, and to Toby Clipperton, Mike McGregor and Meredith Fraser for 5 years' service milestones. We also had the opportunity to extend thanks to our departing board members (Nancy Griffiths, Geoff Kiddell, Suzanne Vandervoort and Leanne Armstrong), as we welcomed our newly-elected board members: Kelsey Adams, Kimberly Bernard and Cynthia Hove.



## MEET THE BOARD

*As part of our ongoing Meet the Board series, we are proud to introduce our newest Board President:*  
**David Smith.**



David currently works at Elgin St. Thomas Public Health as the Manager of Health Promotion. David is in his fifth year on RHAC's Board of Directors. His work within public health and its link to HIV programming fuelled his initial interest in joining the RHAC Board. Advocating and championing for marginalized populations continues to be a passion for him. With the changing landscape of HIV and HCV, David says it is an exciting time to be part of the Board of an AIDS Service Organization (ASO). "Working alongside such a dynamic organization such as RHAC, and contributing to RHAC's mission (through effective governance) is rewarding." David is excited to be working on upcoming Board projects such as an extensive review of Board governance policies, continued discussion about SCS, and the relocation of RHAC. David's education includes a Bachelor of Sciences (BSc) from the University of British Columbia and a Masters of Business Administration (MBA) from the Ivey Business School at Western University.

## STAFF UPDATES

As a result of the Fall 2017 provincial announcement regarding new funds to address the complexities related to Ontario's opioid crisis, RHAC was fortunate to receive new funding to expand our harm reduction efforts. This investment will help RHAC contribute to the efforts to stem the tide of overdoses in our area and increase our capacity for Naloxone and other harm reduction materials distribution. We are working closely with stakeholders in Oxford County and will be engaged in regular collaborative outreach strategies to ensure people who use drugs in Oxford County. To achieve these various objectives we offer a warm welcome to our newest harm reduction team members including: Chelsea Phelps, Elaine Hamm, and Anna Chamberlain.

Additionally, as we work to expand access points for Harm Reduction materials and supplies, we have hired Lily Bialas as our Harm Reduction Community Capacity Building Coordinator. Lily will be working across London with pharmacies and social service agencies interested in working with us to reduce the transmission of HIV/HCV and other blood-borne infections.

RHAC bid farewell to some of our most beloved teammates: Carlen Costa (Regional Coordinator), Christopher Sterling-Murphy (Gay Men's HIV Prevention Worker), and Nancy Griffiths (previous Board President), all of whom made lasting impacts in their roles and who we will greatly miss as part of the RHAC family. Meanwhile Emily Marcoccia (Director of Community Relations) began a one year leave in September of 2017.

In the back half of 2017, RHAC also welcomed Kody Carlson into the role of Gay Men's HIV Prevention Worker, and Dev Magendo as our Ethno-Cultural/Rural Sexual Health Outreach Coordinator. Fran McKeown stepped into the role of Volunteer Services Coordinator, and Martin McIntosh has been leading the Community Relations team as Acting Director.

## SAVE THE DATES



**African, Caribbean  
and Black Canadian  
HIV/AIDS  
Awareness Day**



**Opening  
Doors 2018**

Register at  
[www.2018openingdoors.eventbrite.ca](http://www.2018openingdoors.eventbrite.ca)



**International  
Women's Day**



**A Taste for  
Life 2018**

15th Anniversary  
in London & Area  
[www.atasteforlife.org](http://www.atasteforlife.org)



**A Heartfelt  
Evening**

Silent auction and  
dinner at Winks  
Eatery in Support of  
John Gordon Home



Regional  
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Community Inspired. Courage Driven.

## ***RHAC would like to thank the following grantors and supporters who made our work possible:***

- Gateway Church
- The Memory Walkers and the Bray Family
- Sisters of St. Joseph for supporting Women and HIV: A One-Day Symposium on Wellness, Harm Reduction, HIV and Aging, and Resilience
- London Lawyers Feed The Hungry for supporting RHAC's Country Cupboard Food Bank
- Oliver & Associates for supporting the Client Holiday Dinner
- TD for supporting Open Closet with the "Empowering LGBTQ2+ Youth: Safe Spaces, Connectivity, Skills Development, and Financial Literacy" grant

A special thanks for funding provided by the Government of Ontario.



## **GET INVOLVED**

We need and value the support of volunteers. Contact Fran at [fmckeown@hivaidconnection.ca](mailto:fmckeown@hivaidconnection.ca) to get involved.

Our Volunteer Appreciation Dinner is February 21 at Olive R. Twists from 5:30-7:30 pm. Volunteers can RSVP to Fran at [fmckeown@hivaidconnection.ca](mailto:fmckeown@hivaidconnection.ca).

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*Watch for our Readership Survey this spring!*

### **Save us the postage!**

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