

For Immediate Release

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Local AIDS group adopts program for gay men living with HIV

Victoria: With the closure of Victoria AIDS Resource & Community Resource Society (VARCS), the Vancouver Island Persons Living with HIV/AIDS Society (VPWAS) has adopted one of its program to ensure its valuable work continues.

POZitively Connected is a social and support group for gay and bisexual men living with HIV. In the past two years of the program, a slow but steady increase in membership has occurred, primarily among men over 40 and many over 60 years old.

“There are a lot of gay and bi men living with HIV in the community who have little connection. We know that loneliness and isolation can contribute to poor health and we want to make sure that these men are connected,” explains Craig Dales, Executive Director of VPWAS. “This is a small group, but similar programs in Vancouver, like Average Joes, have made certain that men have strong social connection. And strong social connection improves overall health and well-being.”

Program Facilitator, Michael Yoder agrees. “POZitively Connected is about building community and relationships between men living with HIV. There isn’t a lot out there specifically for gay and bi guys living with HIV and this is a place where guys don’t have to explain – everyone already understands the issues.”

As well as social activities and a facilitated men’s support group (which is open to all men living with HIV/HCV), POZitively connected uses social media to spread information about safer sex. Since starting to post these messages, the local sexually transmitted infections clinic has anecdotally shown an increase in men coming in for testing for a variety of potential infections.

“With social media we can reach not only men living with HIV, but men who have sex with men who might be married or in the closet,” Dales says. “This is important – not only because it reduces the risk of HIV transmission, but with the recent syphilis outbreak, men are getting the word about being careful and being tested for different infections.”

He points out, “In the Island Health region, 44% of new cases of HIV are still among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men. POZitively Connected makes sure that not only are men living with HIV finding the support they need, but that other men are getting information to improve their sexual choices.”

“We encourage gay and bi men living with HIV to contact us and learn more about our Society and the POZitively Connected program.” VPWAS is a peer group operated by and for people living with HIV/HCV.

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