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POSITIVE YOUTH CALL ON FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO CREATE NATIONAL HIV STRATEGY

LANGLEY, BC: This past week saw 28 HIV-positive, Hepatitis-C positive, and co-infected youth aged 18-32 (hereinafter referred to as 'positive youth') converge for 4-day national meeting to discuss gaps in care resulting from the lack of a coordinated national HIV strategy.

The event, Youth Unleashing Power: a Positive Youth Symposium, now in its 3rd year, provides an opportunity for positive youth to share stories, gain knowledge, and create a national network for movement building and support. The symposium is unique in that it is entirely created and implemented by positive youth, including the facilitation of workshops, presentations and talking circles. Session topics this year included discussions around the impact of HIV criminalization, the history of HIV activism, movement building and national strategies to improve the lives of positive youth.

Youth Unleashing Power was initiated by the Vancouver Island Persons living with HIV/AIDS Society with the generous support of YouthCO, Canadian Foundation for AIDS Research and ViiV Healthcare.

In Canada, youth aged 15 - 29 accounted for 25% of all new HIV diagnoses in 2016. The rates of diagnosis continue to rise amongst youth, with a 13% increase between 2012 and 2016.

An estimated 65, 040 people in Canada are currently living with HIV, and of those, approximately 20% (or 12, 820 people) are unaware of their status.

Saskatchewan is currently facing an unequal burden of the HIV epidemic, with the highest rates of HIV in the country - a rate as high as some countries in sub-saharan Africa. Doctors have called on the government to declare a state of emergency in the province.

The opioid crisis continues to claim lives across the country. HIV and HCV positive youth face disproportionate levels of substance use issues, mental health issues, and criminalization.

According to the HIV/AIDS Legal Network, some 104 million dollars has been cut from national HIV funding since 2004, with current funding levels at the lowest they have been in over a decade. There is currently no commitment from the government to address the chronic underfunding of a national HIV strategy.

Positive youth across the country continue to face barriers in accessing treatment, from medication costs to unequal access to care.

Stigma ensures that positive youth continue to face discrimination and violence: at home, in school, in the workplace, in the court system, and in public.

Due to the impacts of the HIV epidemic, youth are coming together to demand that more be done from both the federal and provincial governments. With a desire to ensure better health and social outcomes across the country, Canada's positive youth call on the Federal and Provincial governments to meet the following demands:

- 1) The immediate end to the criminalization of HIV non-disclosure in Canada.
- 2) Free and universal access to Anti-Retroviral Therapies across the country, including Post Exposure Prophylaxis and Pre Exposure Prophylaxis.
- 3) The creation of a national strategy to curb infection rates amongst youth in Canada.
- 4) More funding specifically allocated for HIV and HCV youth services and programmes. In addition, more funding allocated to all HIV and HCV services and programmes across the country.
- 5) The development of educational materials and campaigns that focus on HIV and HCV youth in ways that are culturally relevant, including the dissemination of the Undetectable = Untransmittable campaign.
- 6) An end to the war on drugs, and immediate access to a safe drug supply.

Positive youth across the country continue to be leaders in their communities. Programs like Youth Unleashing Power create spaces that not only provide a platform for national organizing, but also provide a space where positive youth can create community and be supported to find healing and rest.

As one participant put it, "YUP was an amazing retreat. It taught me that through the power of telling your story and connecting with peers that have experienced the same thing as you, healing is not only possible, but probable." Similarly, another participant stated: "I got to talk about issues I have that people in my everyday life do not understand with people that do. It was a safe space to unwind and recharge. It was something my spirit needed and I'm so blessed that I got to attend and be apart of [the symposium]."

Looking at years to come, Youth Unleashing Power will continue to provide a space for national movement building among HIV/HCV positive youth.

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