JUMPSTART!
Establishing a guide to positive living for newly diagnosed gay & bisexual men.

PrEP approved by Health Canada - now what?

ALSO
- Inside ACT’s new Strategic Plan
- SNAP!
And more!
Together Towards Zero.

ACT’s new strategic plan, launched in January with an open house to show off our new space at 543 Yonge Street, establishes our direction for the next four years, and it does so with three words.

Together: capturing ACT’s emphasis on building a collective response to HIV in Toronto, across the sector and with allied health and social service organizations.

Towards: recognizing that process that is integral to our work, we seek to achieve the goals that we set while learning from the ups and downs along the way.

Zero: reflecting the United Nations bold 90-90-90 plan, now officially endorsed by the Canadian government, we are working towards living in a city with zero new HIV infections, zero HIV-related deaths and zero stigma related to HIV and AIDS.

Of course the backdrop of the strategic plan is the exceptional slate of ACT’s programs and services, offered for free all year round. We are so proud to be an organization that no matter who you are, if HIV has touched your life and you come to ACT, there is something for you.

Over the past several months we confirmed a new program at Maple Leaf Medical Clinic, and will be adding three more support groups throughout the spring. These are made possible by a grant we received from the MAC AIDS Fund to establish permanent supports relating to the mental health of cis and trans gay, bi and queer men.

Elsewhere in the agency, ACT’s WHAI workers have been hard at work developing a new situational analysis project to hear from women living with and at risk for HIV in Toronto to develop resources to help service providers offer the most suitable, relevant care possible. Also, the new season of Community Health Forums focussed on topics that clearly resonated with the community. Over 400 people came to learn more about undetectable viral loads, and hear updates on the criminalization of HIV non-disclosure and PrEP, to name a few.

Yes, PrEP indeed. 2016 has already been quite the year for the emerging HIV prevention method. Approved late in February, it has been very effective at reenergizing conversations about how to prevent HIV.

Our work would not be possible without the commitment of our volunteers, donors and board. Thank you for all of the support ACT is so lucky to receive every day! If you haven’t visited our new offices, at 543 Yonge Street up on the 4th floor, please drop by any time and say Hi. We’ll be waiting.
ANNUAL VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION PARTY

On a chilly November night, ACT welcomed over 200 of its volunteers to the Hard Rock Cafe in downtown Toronto to celebrate all that they do for the agency. And they do a lot – together, ACT’s volunteers donated an incredible 18,500 hours over the past year through the Buddy Program and other support services, front desk duties, outreach, special events and our Board of Directors, just to name a few. It was a rocking and raucous night – thank you all for coming!!

It was a dedicated group of volunteers who started ACT back in 1983, and volunteers continue to form its backbone. They lend the agency’s its capacity to fulfill its mission, and the ability to serve all people living with and affected by HIV in Toronto.

If you’d like to join this amazing group, contact Sergio Martinez at smartinez@actoronto.org!
JumpStart is an ACT group program for gay and bisexual men who have been recently diagnosed with HIV. The group is a 4-week workshop series with a significant emphasis on providing a safe space to facilitate peer discussion and learning related to:

1. Current HIV treatment options and the doctor/patient relationship;
2. Emotions concerning an HIV diagnosis and coping strategies for use in day-to-day life;
3. Sexual health, with up-to-date information on STIs, HIV transmission, and related legal implications regarding disclosure; and
4. Relevant resources.

Adapted from a program that began in Melbourne, Australia, JumpStart has been quite popular at ACT, with 30 newly diagnosed men having participated in the program since it began in mid-2013. The program has been offered on four occasions and features the following presentations:

1. HIV Treatment and the Doctor-Patient Relationship, presented by Dr. Jeff Bloom from Toronto Western Hospital
2. Emotional Health, presented by John Larsson from ACT
3. Sexual Health, Intimacy, and Disclosure, presented by Rui Pires from ACT
4. Pharmacy Services, presented by Dr. Michael Fanous

The four weekly JumpStart sessions are three hours each and combine one of the presentations above with group discussion facilitated by two trained ACT volunteers. Che Prince and Kurtiss Trowbridge have been facilitating JumpStart for the past couple years. “Having had the opportunity to co-facilitate the JumpStart program a few times now, I continue to be inspired by the sense of resiliency that participants display. While they certainly have moments of fear or anxiety, it is truly amazing to see how a group of individuals who share a common experience can come together to support one another”, says Kurtiss Trowbridge.

Throughout this past winter, we asked for feedback from the participants through an online survey, which 16 of the 30 past participants completed. 4 of the 16 survey respondents then attended an in-person catch-up and program evaluation session.

The majority of survey respondents had attended all four JumpStart sessions, with only 2 respondents having missed one of the four sessions. Of the respondents, 86.7% currently have an HIV specialist and all respondents indicated that they are currently taking HIV medications.
During the in-person evaluation session, group participants highlighted the emotional impact of being diagnosed with HIV and how difficult it can be to access HIV-specific services for the first time. Participants were particularly concerned about others finding out they were HIV-positive – they described anxiety about going to ACT, and apprehension about participating in a group program. They also described challenges taking in new information related to HIV and its treatment which also made it difficult for some participants to remember details related to the content covered by the different JumpStart presentations. Perhaps it’s not surprising that the final JumpStart presentation, Pharmacy Services, stood out for participants – the discussion on how to secure drug coverage and how to cultivate a good relationship with your pharmacist was described as useful and encouraging.

All group participants told us that they would recommend JumpStart to others who were newly diagnosed with HIV (it “gets the ball rolling and moves you in the right direction,” one said). They highlighted the program’s structure (presentation + facilitated group discussion) as particularly helpful for learning when the content is emotionally charged. As one participant explained, “The way it’s designed gives us the opportunity to bring out our experiences and what we are going through. Having structure was good, it channeled our emotions”.

JumpStart is designed to be a first step for gay and bisexual men following an HIV diagnosis. ACT’s free, confidential counselling service and ACT’s 10-week Newly Diagnosed Support Group are companion programs that offer additional support to people recently diagnosed with HIV. For more information please contact Andrew Eaton, at 416-340-8484 ext. 283 or at aea-ton@actoronto.org

Acknowledgements
Thank you to the people who participated in JumpStart’s evaluation for your time and thoughtful feedback.

“I really benefited from the guest speakers. I learned a lot about my new diagnosis and how to better understand and navigate through these early months. Speaking with others that were in my same situation made me feel connected.”

ACT’s JumpStart program is made possible by the support of: Brent Allan, Dr. Jeff Bloom, Dr. Michael Fanous, John Larsson, Vic Perri, Rui Pires, Che Prince, Kurtiss Trowbridge, Robert Wallace, the City of Toronto and the Public Health Agency of Canada.
ACT’s 2016-2020 Strategic Plan is the result of a year-long process that engaged a variety of stakeholders and consultants, including people living with HIV, service users, ACT volunteers, members, donors, staff and allied organizations inside and out of the HIV sector. The document that emerged from this reflects the dynamic and exciting landscape of HIV services in Toronto in 2016, with an eye to the future.

That future we are working towards is a Toronto where there are no new HIV infections, no HIV-related stigma, and where all people living with HIV can access HIV treatment.

To achieve this vision, we commit to working together as an organization, as a sector, as a community and as a movement. We believe this is a shared goal and one that can only be achieved through collaboration. Putting it into practice is the first of many steps along the path towards Zero. Chief among the tasks ahead is integrating the Plan into ACT’s programs and services, into staff work-plans and the agency’s public messaging.

Here’s some of what was gathered through our engagement process:

• “ACT is a strong leader and one with much respect in the community. They can be a champion within the sector.”
• “Build, maintain, and foster good sincere, engaged relationships with both private and public funders.”
• “Provide wrap-around, comprehensive services and system navigation support for people who are aging with HIV and their caregivers.”

MISSION
ACT works to reduce new HIV infections in Toronto and promotes the independence, dignity, health and well-being of people living with HIV and AIDS and those at increased risk of HIV.

VISION
A Toronto where there are no new HIV infections, and the people and communities living with or most affected by HIV and AIDS live long and healthy lives free from stigma and discrimination.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES
ACT’s strategic priorities will orient the agency as we work towards achieving our vision. The following are our goals over the next four years:

• Deliver Programs and services across the HIV prevention, engagement and care continuum
• Lead in gay men’s health
• Strengthen Toronto’s collective response to HIV
• Invest in organizational excellence
The approval of PrEP was unceremonious. Most didn’t hear about it until weeks later. It was also a very important moment in the history of HIV, and specifically HIV prevention. It marks the first biomedical form of prevention – not a physical barrier but a chemical mixture – approved for use for HIV-negative folks in Canada.

Rather than wait passively for clarification around how PrEP will be covered and for whom, ACT did what it has done so many times in the past: we spoke up. With the help of CTAC, ACT organized three focus groups for cis and trans gay, bi and queer men. Each brought a unique perspective to PrEP. From these groups we developed a patient-input submission to a national process called the Common Drug Review, making the case for PrEP to be covered on public drug plans for people at increased risk for HIV.

While we are optimistic about the future of PrEP, access remains a barrier in terms of both cost and awareness among healthcare professionals. ACT is committed to working towards securing full access for people who are at increased risk for HIV.

Opportunities will be identified along the pathway to coverage in Ontario for ACT to continue to make the case for the potential of PrEP to rethink sex and HIV prevention in 2016.
SNAP!, presented by TD, celebrated its 15th anniversary in style on March 31st. Honorary Chair Joe Mimran, pictured above, and his amazing partner Kim Newport-Mimran were among the belles of the ball, a ball that brought in over $165,000 (net) for ACT! That includes, in no small part, an amazing $35,700 in the growing Adopt-a-Lot program, where donors agree to match the value of a piece from the Live Auction with a donation straight to the programs and services of ACT.

Thank you to the over 125 volunteers that made the event happen, the artists who contributed their energy and vision, and the many committees and supporters who made SNAP! 2016 such a smashing success!

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