



# Better Health. Together.



ANNUAL REPORT

2021 - 2022



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# WHAT'S *new* AT ACT?

## **ACTing on Monkeypox (MPox)**

Since Toronto's first MPox case was reported back in May 2022, ACT has been collaborating with Toronto Public Health and the Gay Men's Sexual Health Alliance to bring prevention and awareness information to our community. The stigma towards the 2SLGBTQ+ community has not been unnoticed during this outbreak and is unfortunately all too familiar to those who have lived through the stigma associated with HIV and AIDS. ACT is working hard to ensure our community stays informed and educated.

ACT has worked with Toronto Public Health to host two MPox vaccination clinics. The first clinic in June just before Pride was offered to gay, bi, queer guys into guys (including cis, trans and non-binary folks) the group considered to be at highest risk for MPox. All doses were accounted for before the first dose was even administered – this highlighted the incredible demand for vaccine and was an acknowledgement of the safe and non-judgemental environment made possible at ACT's clinic.

After the first clinic, we received feedback from our trans and non-binary community members that they were having difficulty accessing vaccines. This resulted in a second vaccination clinic in late August for all gender-diverse people.

With MPox still a challenge in our community, ACT will continue to play an important role to keep our community informed of options related to prevention and treatment and has staff available to provide support for those in need.

With the help of donors and our community of supporters, ACT works to be responsive to emerging sexual and mental health issues, as well as broad-based issues that could improve our ability to deliver services to people living with HIV and those at increased risk.

Below are just a few ways community support has helped us to be responsive to the needs of our community.

## **The Trans Health Card**

The Trans Health Card is a tool developed by ACT for gender-diverse people to facilitate gender-affirming care and reduce the frequency and severity of micro-aggressions. The Trans Health Card is used alongside a government-issued health card to share your preferred name, pronouns, and provides space to list any transition related information such as Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) or recent/upcoming surgeries.

The card was created after community consultations revealed that the healthcare system is simply not changing quickly enough to support trans and non-binary folks. Most consultation participants reported not wanting to seek out medical help, even when necessary, due to fear of being mis-gendered or harassed.

A lot of folks have trouble advocating for themselves within our complex healthcare system. The Trans Health Card is a form of empowerment, providing a tool in what might otherwise be an awkward or uncomfortable conversation.

With the support of our community, we hope the example of the Trans Health Card helps provide the path for other health organizations to follow to ensure better health support for our trans and non-binary community.



## **TOMQ Collaboration for our Sex Workers**

In collaboration with TOMQ, ACT has been running programs to support gay, bi, queer and trans guys who engage in any kind of sex work. In March 2022, ACT assembled Comfort Packages for sex workers and folks who engage in Party N Play (people who use substances during their sexual activity) – we handed out 50 personalized comfort packages containing grocery cards, sexual health and harm reduction supplies, gender affirming gear, hand made soap and other necessities.

With the popularity of the comfort packages making it clear that more sex worker-focused programming is necessary, ACT launched an Only Mans online group chat. It creates a judgement-free space to share resources, meet new friends with similar lived experiences and to de-stress. Topics in the encrypted chat space include screening your clients, “what’s in my hoe bag”, learning and asserting your boundaries, and safer sex work practices like the buddy system and knowing your exits.

Our TOMQ Project Coordinator is surprised by the lack of supports available for men who do sex work. When Kristopher, Program Coordinator, asked “are we the only ones doing this?” it became clear that ACT needed to partner with other sex work services like Maggie’s to increase both programs reach with guys involved in sex work. “It’s so needed. We’re very happy with how the comfort packages have been received and how the program has grown beyond our initial plans and expectations”.

## **BESAW**

ACT’s BIPOC Engagement, Solidarity and Anti-Oppression Working Group (BESAW) was established in November 2020, as a means of bringing actionable change to ACT. With over 60% of ACT’s service users identifying as BIPOC, this working group was charged with the mission of providing recommendations and actions related to education and training, as well as partnership and advocacy related to Anti-Racism. BESAW meets once a month to discuss opportunities for ACT to improve its anti-racial literacy.

BESAW was created out of a growing sense of unease and concern for real world events, particularly those affecting the Black and Indigenous communities. It became clear that there needed to be a dedicated working group to build a safe space for these conversations to take place, and to make sure ACT is showing up in authentic ways for our BIPOC service users, staff and community members.

To date, some of BESAW’s most impressionable work has been creating questions specific to BIPOC service users on our satisfaction survey and hosting Black History Month events for our community. Internally, Brave Space Socials were created for our BIPOC staff members to connect, and the committee is tasked with doing a comprehensive review of policies and procedures.

“The most important part is that it brings perspective to the entire organization, creating a space for action instead of just words. We’re developing concrete actions to tangibly explore the inequities that BIPOC people experience, which are often compounded with being HIV-positive” – Gavin, former BESAW co-chair







## TAX CLINIC

# A PRACTICAL SERVICE THAT MAKES A *Difference*

Every year when tax season rolls around, ACT's Tax Clinic opens its doors to anyone living with HIV who needs help getting their taxes filed.

ACT's Tax Clinic has been running for over 20 years, and while we might not submit our tax forms via mail anymore, it remains one of the agency's most popular service offerings. Service users simply bring their tax documents to our Service Access and Tax Clinic Coordinator, Clive, who facilitates the submission of their taxes with the help of our Tax Clinic volunteers.

*"The majority of clients at the tax clinic are on ODSP, or a combination of ODSP and working," says Clive.*

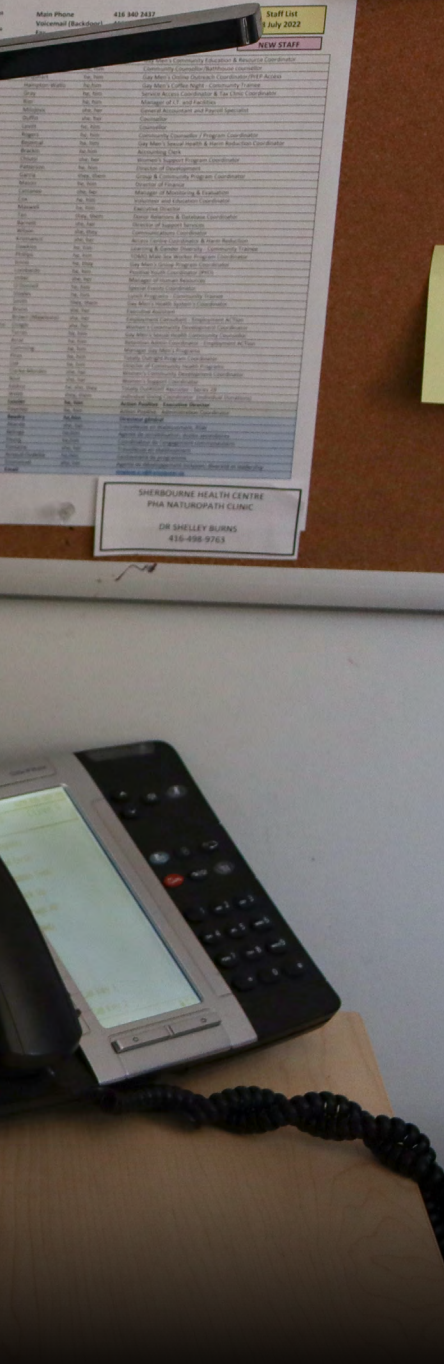
Taxes are a stressful time for most, especially when your income, housing and healthcare may be conditional upon successfully submitting your tax return. Having support from the Tax Clinic helps alleviate the stress associated with tax season for people who may not have the tools to do taxes on their own.

"It's a social determinant of health", Clive says, meaning it's a non-medical factor that influences overall health. "We're making sure our tax clinic patrons aren't facing undue hardship, that they're not forced into more poverty. We make taxes simple."

The tax clinic also supports first-time tax payers such as newcomers and youth who haven't done their taxes in Canada before or who are new to paying taxes. Taxes are usually done within a week to ensure there is no disruption to income or other supports of tax clients.

While traditionally the clinic was exclusively in-person, the pandemic in the past few years forced the clinic to shift to offering a drop-off system. This change has proven to be more successful.

While the main thrust of clients seeking support from the Tax Clinic comes in March and April, Clive and his team will support clients with their taxes up until October each year. The team will sometimes spend several hours on a single return, and help clients with tax returns that are up to three years past due, as well as those of their family members.



A customized cover letter to confirm client name and address

A document checklist to support clients with their tax filing

A tax-payer authorization form

## TAX CLINIC IN NUMBERS

**300**  
HOURS

Amount of support provided by our three tax clinic volunteers and our Coordinator

**175**

Number of tax returns completed last year

**27%**

Number of service users on OW or ODSP



### Remembering Volunteer

## RICHARD LABELLE

ACT fondly remembers Richard who passed in February of this year. An integral part of our Tax Clinic, Richard provided his expert advice to ACT Staff and Service Users for over 15 years. He will be deeply missed.





**SUPPORT PROGRAMS**

# FOR THOSE WHO *Care*

Three of our most popular programs at ACT are the Lunch Programs, Gay Men's Coffee Night and the Women's Support Programs, and it's not hard to see why.

Our coordinators and volunteers have lived experience, a willingness to listen and a genuine care for our service users, all of which contribute to program success. They approach their programs as an equal and as a facilitator

instead of a supervisor, and this is what builds trust with our service users and encourages them to express their feelings and their needs so they can get the most out of their experience.

The success of these programs is all thanks to the hard work and dedication of program coordinators, committed to putting our service users first! Read on to find out more!





**If you were to take a peek into a sitting of one of ACT's Lunch Programs, you would think it was a bunch of old friends meeting up. You wouldn't be too far off.**

Running for almost two decades, the lunch programs serve hot, delicious meals to service users in a warm atmosphere twice per week. The Thursday and Friday Lunch Programs have grown considerably thanks to the support from Michael as its coordinator.

Michael was first a passionate volunteer with the Lunch programs for six years. So when the opportunity to be a part-time coordinator came up, Michael was certainly the right guy for the job.

The program has seven committed volunteers and one "friend of the program" as Michael calls it, who shovels the driveway when COVID regulations forced the lunch program outside in the winter.

Michael sees himself as the action-taker, listening to the needs of the people who attend his lunches and then arranging for those needs to be met. His service users comment that Michael does so much more than just a lunch program. He offers regular email updates, facilitates other outings with participants, and moves mountains to ensure the ACT Lunch Program never skips a lunch. "We don't miss lunches. It's a really important program – people have to eat," says Michael.

Food Security is a major social determinant of health. With community support of the Lunch Programs at ACT, a hot meal means service users can buy other necessities that week.

The program isn't only for food insecure people, it's for anyone living with HIV. It's an important social opportunity for those who need routine. A high point in many service users' weeks. More than just Lunch, it is the chance to get out of the house and hangout. One service user shared, "The atmosphere makes you want to be here. You're free to talk without interruption, eat really good food and have a drink. Michael gives great hugs and it's a warm welcome."

One of our lunch program volunteers sums it up nicely. "The lunch program is like going to your mother's for family dinner – full bellies and happy smiles."

**600+** Lunches served in 2021/2022  
**20** Regular lunch attendees





**Gay Men's Coffee Night (GMCN) is a bi-weekly hang-out where gay, bi, queer (GBQ) men over 40 living with HIV socialize, dish, spill the tea, and find ways to support each other. It's not a therapy group, but a place for GBQ men to come together and find connection with similar people.**

After conducting a community consultation, it became clear that not all GBQ men over 40 needed or wanted a therapy group. They could find therapy elsewhere. They wanted a social group to meet other guys with shared life experiences to build bonds. Bradley is the first dedicated GMCN coordinator and has been involved with the group for several years.

While the group had only two people in 2020, it has since grown to over 40 members thanks to Bradley's method – though Bradley makes it clear that the success of the group is not determined by attendance, but rather the quality of experience. He considers himself more of a facilitator than a coordinator – he works to make sure everyone feels comfortable and can be an equal contributor in the space.

Everything that happens in the group, happens for the group. Participants explore topics that they want to engage in such as laws around HIV non-disclosure, and Bradley is there to facilitate workshops and conversations that will cover those topics of interest.

"We don't have a lot of rules," Bradley says. "We invite everyone to show up as they are, mess and all."

Taking it upon himself to set the example, Bradley openly shares his own experiences as a gay man, both good and bad in the hopes others will soon gain comfort. And they do, which allows for some really meaningful moments and connections. Over time, HIV has become not just a trait shared by everyone in the group, but a unifier. Bradley explains, "When we started, HIV was a unifier but not a strength. It was the reason we were all here at the group, but now it's the reason we stay here and we're all stronger for it. We've chosen to keep the group open to exclusively HIV-positive people so it will never be our divider."

When listening to Bradley talk, the genuine care he has for his service users is clear. The community they've built is one of love and support, creating a space to express all of who you are.

**30** Number of GMCN  
Events in 2021-2022





◆ Savannah and Grace, Women's Support Coordinator

One of ACT's largest communities of service users, Women's Support Programming has grown drastically over the last three years. The increase of 500% can be linked to some positive word of mouth that service users had been spreading – ACT's Women's programs are a place where you can comfortably talk about who you are, free from judgement.

**25%**

of service users at  
ACT are women.

**282**

care packages delivered  
to women's program  
participants last year

**"It's a claimed space," says Grace, the Women's Support Coordinator who's been around the programs for many years.**

While the participants come from many different countries, they come together for the same reason. They have similar backgrounds and stories to share as women living with HIV. For many, the program is an opportunity to support women in finding their voice. Some are just starting to learn they can stand up and make their own choices. Grace shared, "Hearing personal stories makes a big difference, it seems like there is always someone here who's been through what you're going through no matter what it is, and there is always support and willingness to meet you where you are."

Our Women's programs are based in peer support – Women get the chance to learn together, support each other, and to grow as a community – Grace calls the group

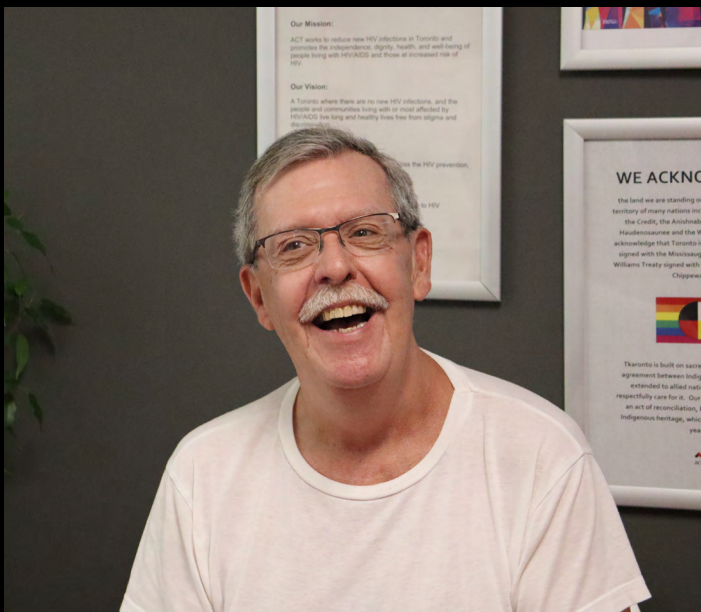
a family. Whatever challenges the women are facing, Grace is there to back them up and provide them with the tools and knowledge they need.

When the pandemic came into effect and programming was moved to a virtual format, Grace saw a surprising jump in participation and program attendance. Meeting from wherever they were was actually easier for most women – they no longer had to arrange childcare or plan for transportation time. This removed major barriers to accessing programs, which is a contributor to the leap in participation. For this reason, Grace will continue to offer programming in a hybrid mode, to ensure that participants are able to access services in a way best meets their needs.

# THE *Faces* OF THE ACCESS CENTRE

## VOLUNTEER PROFILES

As the first point of contact for everyone who comes through the doors at ACT, these three Access Centre Volunteers have collectively contributed 67 years of service in support of those we serve. We're proud to share the stories of folks who likely represent a familiar face to many within the ACT community!



### David

Though it is very hard to believe now, David hasn't always been the happy smiling face you might come across at the Access Centre. Rumour has it, David was once incredibly shy, something he claims volunteering has helped him overcome.

David came to ACT at a time when he was at a very low point in life and in need of routine. A counsellor here at ACT recommended he volunteer to fill his time and establish a pattern for his life. David decided to pursue ACT's Volunteer Core Skills training to become a volunteer.

That was in 1999. Since then, David has taken additional training to become a Support Group Facilitator. David was a lead volunteer with the Community Health Forums as they were getting started nearly 20 years ago. For over 17 years, David has been helping out with the Lunch programs, with his close friend Harvey – who you'll meet shortly! He's currently settled into the Access Centre Volunteer role, greeting staff, service users and visitors.

The sense of structure and opportunity for building deep connections with amazing people is what keeps David volunteering at ACT. While he refers to some of the volunteering work he does as basic, easy tasks, David takes it as a personal reward when he's able to connect someone with the program or service that will benefit them.

"Over the arc of time, I've made some wonderful connections and friendships with some truly amazing people, that have full hearts and who are all about giving and sharing. In life, when you come across a place where there are that many people with a like-minded attitude, you want to hold onto it," David said.





## Harvey

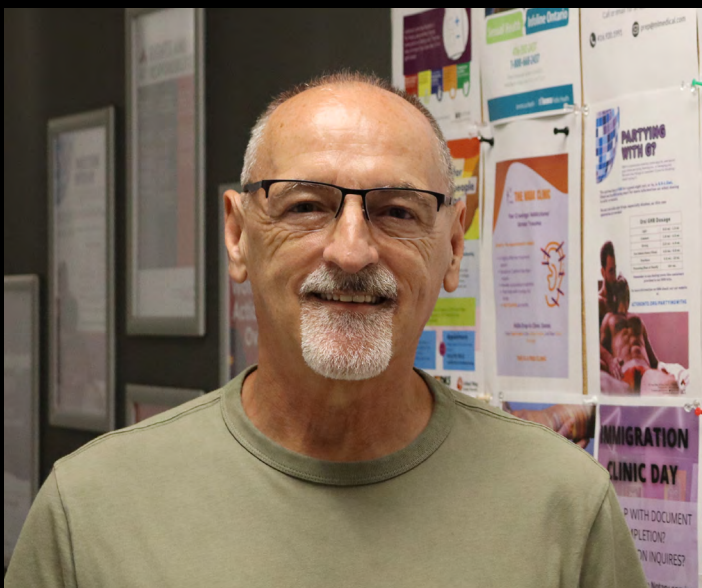
Harvey is an avid cyclist, a proud financial donor and is a dedicated volunteer. It's something he learned from his mother, who spent years volunteering at local hospitals. When faced

with all the free time brought on through impending retirement, Harvey felt driven to get involved and give back to the community – ACT seemed like a good place to do that.

In Fall of 1999, Harvey submitted his application to become a volunteer with ACT. Since then, he's contributed his time and energy to the Lunch Programs and has been a Buddy in the Buddy Program. Most recently, Harvey has become a mainstay in the Access Centre.

Harvey has found some life-long friends through his volunteering, and likes getting to know the staff and service users who come by the office: "I think it's so important to have the opportunity to continue to interact with people, which is what keeps me coming back. Helping clients who walk in here bewildered and lost to find their way is what keeps me here," Harvey shared.

Harvey's piece of wisdom: "Join something and stick with it. It makes things worth it. These commitments make up the highlights of your life!"



## Phil

Phil started out as a volunteer at the Toronto People with AIDS Foundation (PWA) and was convinced to take up a volunteer shift with the other agency sharing space in the building at the time – ACT! Phil has been volunteering with ACT ever since – an astounding 21 years, making him among the most seasoned Access Centre volunteers.

Phil has spent those years honing his front desk skills and making that first point of contact as smooth as possible. He says, "I try to match their tone of voice, and make sure they aren't scared away. That first point of contact is important. It's something I've gotten much better at with practice!"

Phil likes the front desk because it's so hands-on. He gets to meet a lot of people, and he feels a sense of accomplishment when he can answer that important call from someone who is in distress and unsure of their next steps. He does his best to calm them down and get them to a level where they can see the solution. It helps grow their comfort and trust with the agency and he can direct them to where they need to be.

"Coming to ACT means that for a period of time, you can relax and take a break from worry," Phil said.

Phil acknowledges that volunteering with ACT gives back to him personally just as much. It gives him something to fill his time, frontline access to healthcare information, and helps him stay connected. He's even made new friends along the way.

When looking back on his years at ACT, Phil spoke highly of his involvement with the AIDS Walk. "The crowds were so immense, seeing that level of community and support made the AIDS Walk a highlight for me."



# *Delivering* **HIV TEST-KITS TO OUR COMMUNITY**

The HIV testing world saw a big shift in the last two years. That was when, for the first time ever in Canada, an at-home HIV self-test was approved for use. At-home HIV self-testing is now becoming increasingly more popular as a more convenient alternative to booking appointments at your local clinic.

In-person HIV-testing is a familiar, and somewhat daunting experience for many. It often includes long periods in a waiting room, followed by days, or even weeks of waiting for results to come back. HIV self-tests are ready for pick up or can be mailed directly to your home or office in discreet packaging so you can test where you'd like. These rapid tests include clear, easy-to-follow instructions. The results, which are ready in two minutes, are 99.9% accurate when instructions are properly followed.

ACT has been an official partner on two pilot projects, Get-A-Kit & Reach Nexus. These two projects provide self-testing equipment and various sexual health resources. For a time, they even included COVID-19 self-test kits. Members of our community can access whichever program best suits their needs based on eligibility, availability, process and support.

Mike, one of the first to use an HIV self-test kit from ACT, says the program has made it very easy to test on their schedule. "It allows me to keep up with the recommended frequency of testing for someone with my level of risk. Otherwise, I wouldn't be testing enough and it might affect the people I'm in contact with."

With support from our community, one of the main goals is ensuring people experience minimal barriers to access HIV self-testing. This includes reaching marginalized communities who may not have a way of testing anonymously.

And success in removing barriers is in the numbers -- 34% of the testers in ACT's Get-A-Kit program have never been tested for HIV before.

"It's an overwhelming sense of control, privacy and dignity," said one self-test user of the process. "As queer people at risk of HIV and STI's (as well as COVID and MPox), detaching ourselves from the uncomfortable process of testing in a clinical space is the relief and the breath of fresh air that we need."

A vital component to the self-testing process is having support readily available, regardless of the test result. In-person, this support may come from an on-site mental health counsellor. In the case of a positive test, there are doctors ready to set up a treatment regimen, and counsellors to help you work through the resulting emotions. While a tester may be alone in their self-testing process, regardless of the result, support is available and at the ready. For a positive result, the person's next step is to report their result and someone from the self-test project will reach out to schedule a confirmatory test in-person, and to discuss next steps with HIV treatment. Counselling support is available for everyone via message or phone call throughout the process.



Self-test kits are truly changing the landscape of HIV testing, and brings a lot of potential for STBBI testing. Widely available and accessible HIV and STBBI testing removes the stigma and shame associated with getting tested. Providing at home test kits will make this possible and create a better experience for anyone who wants to keep on top of their sexual health.



### Quick Facts About **Get-A-Kit** at ACT:

**965**

kits distributed  
since Sept. 2021.

**32**

average age of those  
requesting HIV self-test kits

**10%**

Of testers identify as  
trans or non-binary



**DONOR PROFILE**

**THE ENTERTAINMENT  
INDUSTRY BROUGHT**

*Gail & George Anthony*

**CLOSER TO ACT**



Being connected to the entertainment industry in the late '70s and early '80s, one may lose count of the number of people you cared about who were lost to AIDS. For Gail & George Anthony, there's one person in particular who made a significant impact on their lives.

"Our kids loved Uncle Dick," Gail shares. 'Uncle Dick,' as he was so lovingly referred to by Gail & George's three children, was Richard Benner, the notable Canadian director and screenwriter perhaps best known for his 1977 film *Outrageous!*, one of the first gay-themed films to receive a wide release in North America. Benner would pass away in December of 1990 due to complication from AIDS.

“

***"Dick made movies, so that was cool to the kids, but they also found him fun to be around," adds George. "It was Dick who asked us to ensure that we educate our children about HIV and AIDS."***

”

Their effort to fulfill the promise of staying educated and informed eventually saw Gail & George introduced to ACT through the charity's *Dancers for Life* event.

"It was Veronica Tennant who brought us to *Dancers for Life*," George said. "Veronica, a brilliant prima ballerina, subsequently became a brilliant television producer, and I was lucky enough to work with her on the dazzling *Salute to Dancers for Life* special she produced for CBC Television."

While some of you may not know George Anthony by his name, his work represents many of the cornerstones of CBC's entertainment line-up over

the last 25 years. George has received honours nationally and internationally for his creative role in bringing many of the CBC's best shows to life, including *Royal Canadian Air Farce*, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, and *The Rick Mercer Report*.

Being honoured for your career in entertainment is one thing. Receiving an honour like the *Together Towards Zero Award* from ACT is quite another.

“

***"It was humbling to say the least to receive that call from an ACT Board Member," Gail admits. "We don't consider ourselves significant contributors. We give what we can and hope that it makes an impact."***

”

Gail and George certainly are donors making an impact. After attending their first *Dancers for Life* Gala in 1993, they have remained among ACT's most loyal supporters. From annual donations and pledges to the AIDS Walk, to being a monthly donor for over 15 years, support from donors like Gail and George help ensure programs evolve and are enhanced for people living with HIV and those at increased risk.

Their support extended to the *Together Towards Zero Luncheon* as one of its first event sponsors. And they were matching supporters the last two years in its virtual additions.

"We feel such gratitude to be able to contribute in some small way to the support ACT provides," George adds. "We know there is a lot more work to do, and we want to ensure ACT can continue to be there for those in need."



# HEARING FROM THOSE WE SERVE

As a sexual and mental health agency serving people, it's important that those served through ACT's programs and services have their voices heard. In this way, staff can work to make positive changes that reflect the evolving needs of service users. As the powerful expression in this sector goes -- 'Nothing about us, without us.'

That's where the Service User Satisfaction Survey, commonly referred to as the SUSS, comes in. This comprehensive survey tool helps gauge how ACT is doing in the eyes of people whose feedback is most important -- the SUSS assesses things like overall accessibility, quality of programs/supports and experience. Feedback from the SUSS guides efforts to make positive changes to our programs and services to help better serve our community.

This past spring the SUSS was sent out to program participants, with over 20% of service users (159 in total) completing the survey.

Rolling out every two years, the SUSS covers a full range of additional topics including program use and outcomes, programs experience and environmental impacts. Keeping the SUSS timely and relevant, it also included questions about COVID and sought specific feedback from those who identify as BIPOC.

It was wonderful to welcome service users safely back for in-person programming earlier this year, but the impacts of COVID have transformed program delivery -- and that's because of information shared in the SUSS.

Many of ACT's programs have shifted to a hybrid model based on the needs of service users, empowering both service users who are happy to return in-person and those who prefer online.

**"Hearing from those we serve is something we take very seriously. The feedback we receive is organized and analyzed as an entire organization at all levels,"** shared Jessica Cattaneo, ACT's Former Manager of Monitoring & Evaluation who recently took on an exciting new role with Planned Parenthood Toronto.

**"We care about making sure our programs are aligned with the needs of our service users, so we review all the suggestions and hold ourselves accountable to making sure that change is delivered. We want our service users to know that we're paying attention,"** Jessica added!

## Here's the Good and Not So Good that Service Users Shared about their Experience with Program Disruption Caused by COVID-19

**"I appreciate the option to do zoom/phone. I was surprised counselling was just as good. It saved time and money from travel and booking time off."**

**"Hopefully there will be both options for in person and virtual groups in the future."**

**"I don't do zoom, so have been missing my group. I really want in-person opportunities to return."**

**"In my case, in-person sessions are more beneficial, especially for therapy and communication."**

**749**

total service users

**207**

new service users in 2021/2022

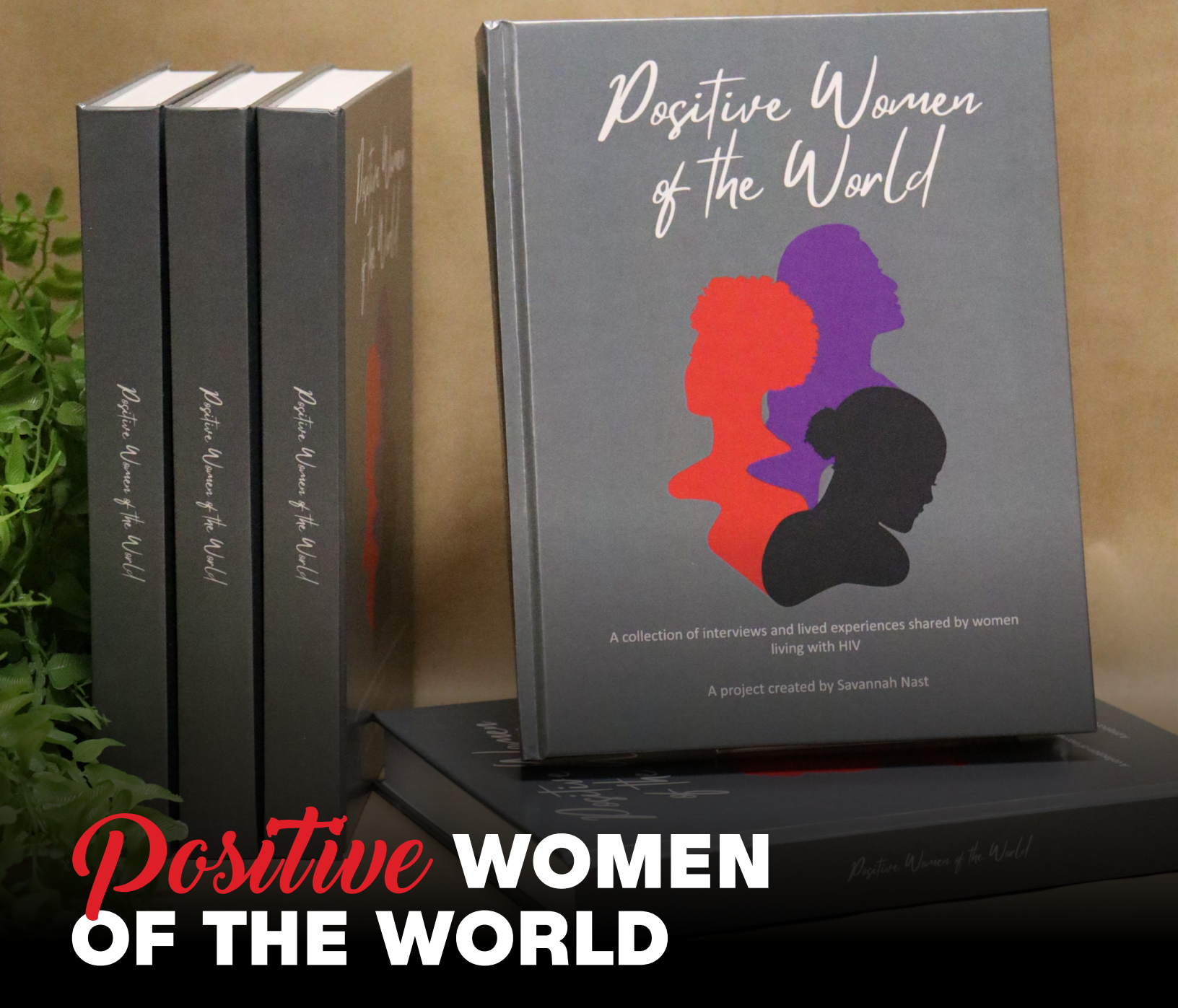
**61%**

of our service users identify as BIPOC

**38%**

of service users are under 40





# *Positive* WOMEN OF THE WORLD

Positive Women of the World, or PWOW, as we affectionately call it, is a collection of 30 stories shared by women living with HIV. The pages of this book capture 1,114 minutes, or over 18 hours of conversations with women supported through ACT programs and services.

It's an important collection of the lived realities for women—HIV-positive women, Black women, Indigenous women, women of colour, queer women, and trans women. The realities of HIV, both medical and social, are often not well-known to the general public, and there are often harmful misconceptions that can have real-life consequences.

One in four people who are newly diagnosed with HIV in

Canada are women. These women often face the brunt of HIV stigma. They may be abandoned by family and friends, struggle to find stable connections, or live with the challenge of trying to develop skills and find meaningful employment while caring for children.

It is why ACT is so grateful to all the women who were willing to share their stories. They each display resilience and courage in the face of significant challenges. It's important that the community know that 100% of the proceeds from the sale of PWOW will support ACT's women's programming, funding the services that all of these women have relied on – for support, and for sisterhood.



◆ Kajiko Nanami\*, from Japan.

\*Kajiko's name has been changed for privacy purposes

## A preview from Kajiko\*'s story in *Positive Women of the World*:

I couldn't forgive myself. Now, after fifteen years of living with it, I love myself more and I really don't feel nervous about telling this to someone I am dating. What I discovered is, if we want to be more comfortable about living life with HIV, we have to be more comfortable talking about it with others. I think I can bring this insight to the people who receive my story, my confession. So that's the most important thing. HIV itself can be accepted by others, but it depends how we talk about it. To talk about HIV in a confident and very calm manner is difficult. It took more than 10 years for me, and yes, I still struggle. I'm going to say this—I have to say this: it's difficult. I came to the conclusion that it's up to people who listen to my story. I can't control the emotion anymore. I tried to control it, I didn't want to shock them; I didn't want to surprise them; I didn't want them to feel bad after they listen to my story, but afterwards, how they take it, is really up to them, not up to me. I think it's because people are ashamed of HIV and people have prejudice about it. That's actually the cause of spreading HIV, because if HIV became like a normal thing to talk about, then every couple could discuss it openly.

"Do you have HIV?"

"No, I don't" or "Yes, I do."

Then they could talk about it. That's a different scenario, I think. We have to reduce prejudice and we have to reduce the fear. And, actually, people who already have HIV and are under treatment are much safer than somebody who doesn't know themselves. Frankly, I think if an HIV patient has been under treatment and maintain an undetectable level, I believe they are really safe. Living honestly and living proudly with HIV, the way of living that impresses others naturally, that's what I am aiming to. But it is a long, long, long process to recover from this shock. Especially, to me. I finally think I am happily living with HIV.



SCAN ME

**Order your book now, and give these women the support and opportunities they deserve.**





## **POSITIVE YOUTH OUTREACH (PYO)**

# **BETTER** *Together*

After long months of social isolation, job loss and now inflation, it's not a surprise that our youth have been struggling. For these reasons, the return to in-person programming for participants of our Positive Youth Outreach (PYO) Program was long overdue.

During the pandemic, attendance at PYO group programming dropped by 80% due to concerns about internet security and lack of connection. Many program participants were already feeling isolated due to their HIV status. It was further compounded by the isolation of the pandemic. The options to improve mental health felt out of reach, housing situations weren't always suitable for attendance in online programming, or participants simply didn't have access to the necessary digital tools.

Fortunately PYOers are able to lean on Marc, a former participant himself, and now PYO Program Coordinator. Program participants shared their favourite parts of programming since its return to in-person. These pieces are what makes the physical programming so much better for participants, what adds the value and makes the program the highlight of each week.

While workshops and HIV-focused conversations are the basis of programming, field-trips and "for fun" activities are the relief that many of the PYOers look forward to each month. Many PYOers aren't able to access recreational spaces and activities on their own due to financial barriers. Marc, with the help of some eager participants, plan group outings such as beach days, picnics and movie nights. It's a chance for participants to relax, hangout, get to know each other in a setting outside of ACT and to just be themselves!

"The skating rink outing was my first time skating. It was a fun way to try something new that I wouldn't have tried by myself," said one PYO participant.

This past May, PYO collaborated with HIV+ running advocate and influencer Gabriel Jarquin to create a weekly Running Club to prepare for the annual Pride & Remembrance Run. For some, it was their first ever experience engaging in a coordinated physical activity that supported them working towards a fitness goal. Under the mentorship of Gabriel, 12 youth participated in the training series, and six youth took part in the Pride Run, with a portion of proceeds supporting the PYO program.





▲ Marc, Positive Youth Outreach Coordinator

One thing you can count on is food or a meal being provided at every PYO meeting. Food insecurity is a major factor in non-adherence to medications. Paying for food can also compete with other demands for time and resources, such as paying for transportation to clinics for medical appointments or social support services. Having hot food or snacks as part of PYO programming means one less meal to worry about.

It can be challenging – even impossible – to share your story and struggles with someone you’ve never met over a platform like Zoom. Being able to establish comfort, trust and a shared experience from the first moment is vital for bringing new people into the program and getting them the support they need.

“Coming to ACT seemed like it would make me feel vulnerable and I was scared,” shared another PYO participant. “But I’ve slowly opened up, I used to only listen and now I’m doing the talking! PYO has helped me come out of my shell.”

Coming together in person can often manifest into new ways of providing support, such as accompanying program participants to appointments.

“Self-advocacy is hard,” says Marc, who will tag along to Doctor’s appointments, as well as other kinds of meetings where a PYOer wants a support person. Marc continues, “Knowing that someone has your back and your best interests in mind is the support many participants need to begin to find the way forward on their own.”

Youth living with HIV are more likely to experience multiple forms of marginalization, and experience barriers to accessing the services they may need due to discrimination and lack of experience navigating complex systems like healthcare and social supports.

PYO runs workshops on topics related to the struggles PYOers face, such as mental health, sexual health, safer substance use, navigating social assistance, HIV status disclosure, HIV and the law, and updates in treatment options. PYO provides service users with the knowledge they need to make important and informed choices for themselves. To help them move from surviving to thriving. We are grateful to donors like the Pride Run and other community supporters who help make this a reality for participants in the program.

**57**

Unique Service Users  
in 2021/2022

**293**

Wellness Checks &  
One-on-One Sessions

**75km**

collectively run by the PYO  
Run Club this year



## Together Towards Zero A Virtual Live Event in Acknowledgement of World AIDS Day



On December 1, 2021, ACT staff came together in unprecedented fashion to transform the office into a live TV studio to present the Together Towards Zero Virtual Celebration in recognition of World AIDS Day. Truly a star-studded event, Together Towards Zero featured television's Rick Mercer and Michael Serapio, along with donors George and Gail Anthony, who were recognized for their years of dedicated support with the Together Towards Zero Award.

Hosted by HIV activist and ACT Board Member Muluba Habanyama alongside Executive Director John Maxwell, the

live program introduced the viewing audience to some of our service users who shared their stories of how programs at ACT helped them not only with their HIV journey, but also with the very real struggle to stay connected during the COVID-19 pandemic, a struggle that so many people can relate to.

The event also paid tribute to John Larsson, one of ACT's longest-standing employees and community members, who retired from his counsellor role and who ACT staff and clients alike already miss.

The broadcast wrapped up with our most ambitious and creative production moment ever, when our intrepid John Maxwell carefully made his way downstairs, followed by our cameras, and presented another Together Towards Zero Award to Zahid Somali and our ever-supportive neighbours at The Village Pharmacy.

We look forward to once again hosting live and in-person for 2022. We thank all those who sponsored our 2021 event and those who made donations. You can watch the full 2021 event on our website. Simply find our 'Events & News' section and click 'World AIDS Day'.



# SNAP



## SNAP 20th Anniversary

For the second year in a row, SNAP (presented by the TD Ready Commitment) went virtual with an exciting 20th Anniversary Live Auction experience. Our dedicated patrons came out in full force to bid high and often on a beautiful collection of photographic art, enjoying a wonderful evening from the comfort of their homes in support of ACT.

Hosted by the very funny and talented Jake Mossop and led by our expert auctioneer Perry Tung, the auction streamed live from our studio on-location at Cowley Abbott Auction house and raised over \$320,000 to support the people served at ACT.

In honour of our 20th anniversary, SNAP received incredible in-kind support from Day Job, who graciously gifted us with a striking brand refresh, introducing some extra excitement and setting SNAP up for continued success in years to come. SNAP's new look cascaded through our website, social media and print materials in early 2022 to incredible acclaim. We are incredibly grateful to the Day Job team for putting over \$40,000 worth of time and effort into the SNAP brand, and we hope to continue working with these kind and generous partners in years to come.

SNAP's 20th Anniversary also marked the end of an era: Sonja Scharf, co-owner of Akasha Art Projects and long-time SNAP

supporter served her final year as member and chair of the Curatorial Committee. Sonja stepped into the role of committee chair in the fall of 2018 and has been instrumental in connecting SNAP with the emerging and established artists who would generously donate their work: artists like Maureen O'Connor, Martine Côté and the late Lucas Murnaghan.

Sonja also worked with Patrick Lightheart to curate one of our most successful Limited Edition collections in SNAP history: a retrospective of Gerald Hannon's works from the Body Politic in partnership with the ArQuives (formerly the Canadian Lesbian & Gay Archives). We will miss Sonja's expert curatorial eye and her passion to chip in when support was needed, whether it was picking up and delivering donated work to how the collection would be displayed at SNAP previews. We wish Sonja all the best in her future projects and we know she won't be a stranger, as Akasha will remain a fiercely loyal supporter of Toronto's premier photographic art auction and gala evening.

Repeating here what was said in last year's annual report – we look forward with optimism that we will be able to come together with our generous artists, donors, art buyers and sponsors at Arcadian Court for our SNAP auction and gala in 2023 after what will have been four years.

# Thank you

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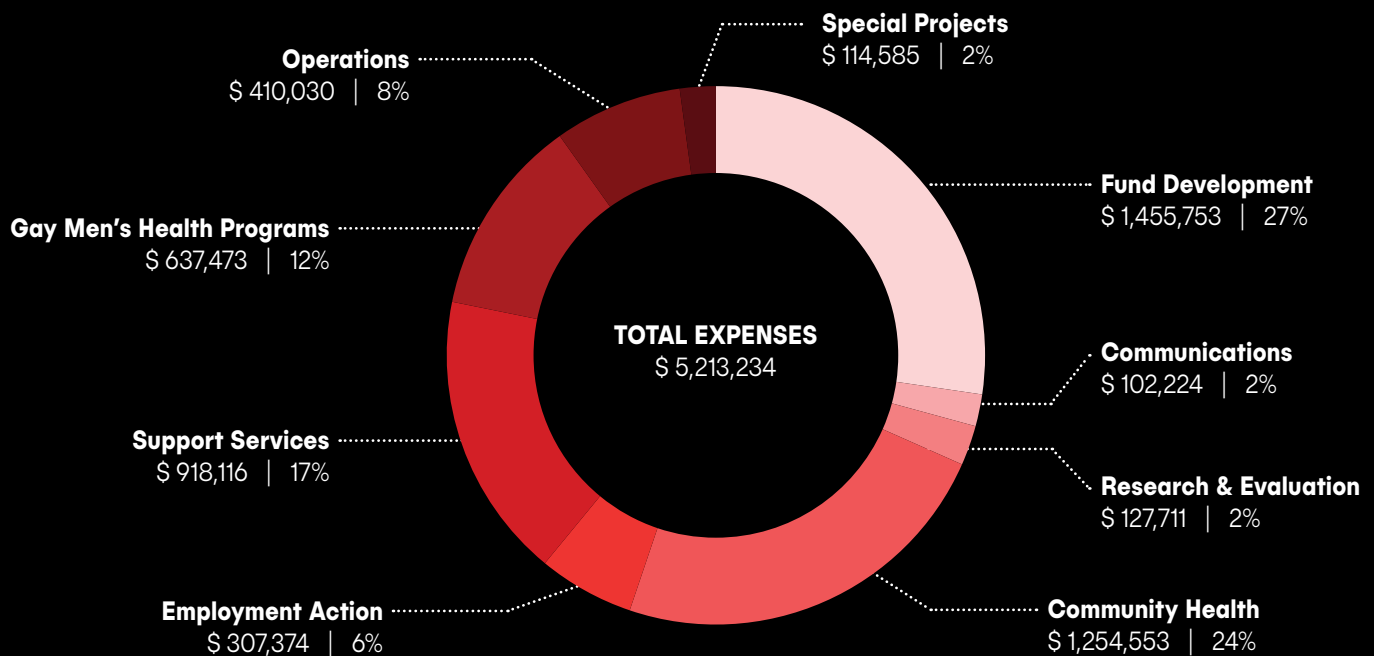
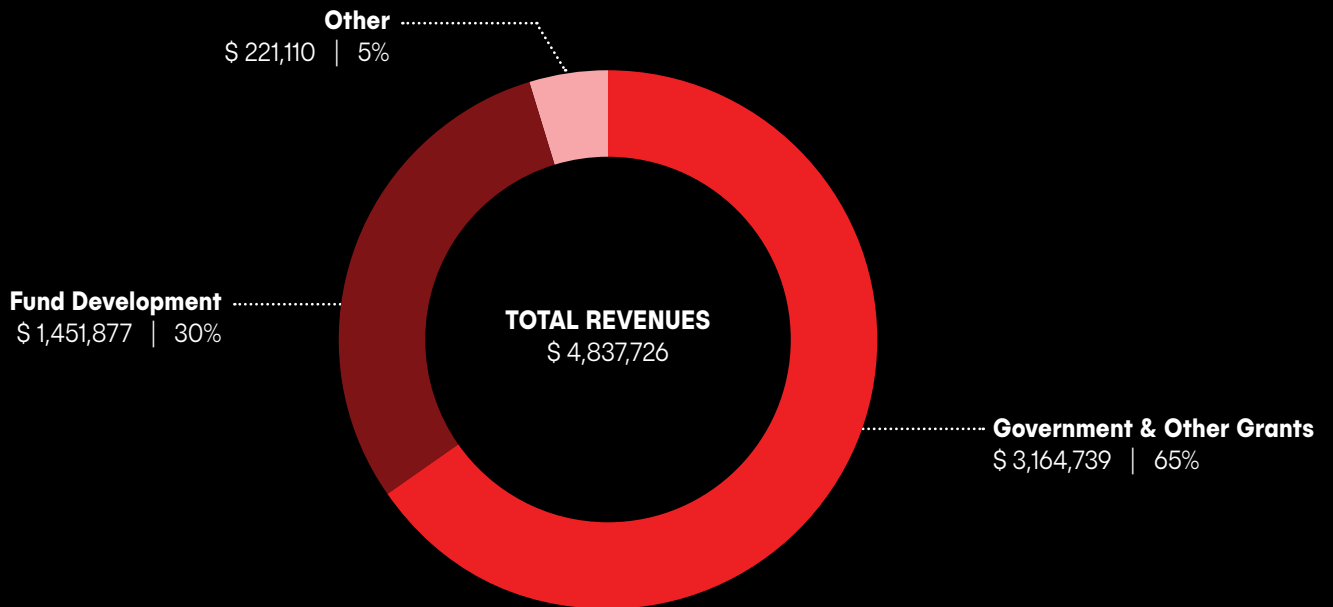
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2021-2022





**John Maxwell** – Executive Director



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**LETTER FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
AND CHAIR OF THE BOARD**

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**BETTER HEALTH.  
TOGETHER.**

This past year has had some dark days of loneliness, isolation, and concern for well-being. But we have also had some much brighter days, as we were able to safely welcome our service users back into our spaces.

And you, our members, funders, donors, and volunteers, were with us through it all. Your support allowed us to re-introduce our service users to the programs they so greatly benefit from socially, physically, and emotionally. You've been right there with us, as we foster **better health, together.**

Your generous support has allowed us to offer basic necessities to those in the community. Lunch programs for people living with HIV provided relief to those who are food insecure, and offer a chance to be among peers to relieve the isolation made worse by two years of COVID-19. Comfort Packages created and distributed to male sex workers and also for women living with HIV (including grocery cards, and important everyday hygiene items) helped to ease the effects of social isolation. The free Income Tax Clinic for people living with HIV gave peace of mind during the stressful tax season to hundreds who didn't have the means to submit their taxes on their own.

Your support also creates room for individual and community empowerment and self-advocacy. Having access to knowledge, sharing experiences, and offering support for young people living with HIV through the PYO Program enabled them to become leaders in their community. Women with HIV shared their stories, found common-ground and built confidence in who they are, surrounded by others who care. Community members had access to HIV self-testing kits (at a time when many sexual health services were closed or had reduced hours), putting

them in control of their sexual health and allowing them to test when and where they wanted.

Creating space for connection wouldn't be possible without our supporters keeping our doors open and our programs running. Programs like Gay Men's Coffee Night (for older gay/bi/queer men living with HIV) were so necessary for keeping people connected with those who have lived similar lives, providing space – sometimes virtual, sometimes socially distanced – to build connections, share knowledge and find support. Support and friendships aren't just found between service users, but also in our wonderful volunteer program, where many of our volunteers find social connection with the kind and caring people who volunteer at ACT or walk through our doors.

All of this is possible because of your contributions to ACT. You give your time, your donations, and your attention to HIV and together we saw it translate into so many lives improved: better mental health, better physical health and well-being and better community health. We saw newly diagnosed young people getting support with their medical appointments, women living with HIV talking about their health without shame, and people getting the tools they need to live with dignity and respect.

On behalf of all the individuals and communities we serve at ACT, we thank you for your unwavering support, especially as we have navigated the ever-changing COVID-19 pandemic. Through our collective efforts, ACT will continue to prioritize the health and well-being of those living with HIV, and the communities most impacted by HIV in Toronto. With you by our side, it brings us that much closer to ending HIV and AIDS in Toronto.



**John Maxwell**  
Executive Director



**Enrico Mandarino**  
Chair, Board of Directors



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