

Fife House launches housing program for those with HIV/AIDS who have substance-use problems

TORONTO, MARCH 23, 2011: Fife House, Canada's largest provider of housing for people and families living with HIV/AIDS, is introducing a housing program for people with HIV/AIDS who have active substance-use issues. This is a first for Ontario.

Over the next three months, 32 housing units with private landlords in Toronto will be made available. This is a rent-supplement program funded by the Toronto Central LHIN (Local Health Integration Network) and Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care. The staff-to-client ratio for the program is 1:8, which means there will be one case management worker for every eight clients.

“We identified this group as a rising concern and there is no question that it's very challenging,” says Keith Hambly, Executive Director of Fife House. “The whole purpose of the program, which is the first time something like this has been done in Ontario, is to provide these people with enough support so they can overcome their substance-use issues and live a more healthy life.

The Addictions Supportive Housing Project is a partnership between Fife House and LOFT Community Services, building on an existing relationship. Fife House will provide expertise from their Homeless Outreach Program in coordination of housing and negotiations with landlords. LOFT staff, experienced in dealing with people with HIV/AIDS and addiction issues, will work closely with participants through intensive case management.

Hambly said that HIV/AIDS is low on the radar these days, but shouldn't be. He says there are 18,000 diagnosed cases of people living with HIV/AIDS in Toronto, which represents about 25 percent of all the cases in Canada, but he says this figure is conservative.

“It is estimated that 33 percent of those infected don't know that they are HIV positive,” Hambly says, adding that this would bring the total number of those living with HIV/AIDS in Toronto to 24,000.

Hambly's concern about HIV/AIDS is also reflected by other information released by the Ontario HIV Epidemiologic Monitoring Unit, a team of epidemiologists and support staff at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto. It says that 25 percent of all cases in the city and province involve women, and that while the number of diagnosed cases was increasing until the late 1990's before levelling off, it has been increasing again over the past three years.

In addition, according to the Communicable Disease Surveillance Unit of Toronto Public Health's Communicable Disease Control, the biggest increase in HIV diagnosis since 2003 has been through heterosexual transmission with a 40 per cent jump in that category.

“There is no room for complacency when it comes to HIV/AIDS,” says Hambly. “The City of Toronto and province of Ontario have many people who are living with this problem, and some of them have been on drugs for 20 years. At Fife House we do what we can, but the truth is that the numbers we help are only a drop in the bucket.”

Hambly says that while only 4 percent of the 18,000 diagnosed cases in Toronto have a substance-use issue in terms of intravenous drug use, there are “probably hundreds or thousands” of people in the city living with HIV/AIDS who have a substance-use problem. He said that up to 40 per cent of the homeless people living with HIV/AIDS seen by Fife House are in this category.

About Fife House

Fife House is Canada's largest provider of supportive residential programming and housing services for people and families living with HIV/AIDS. It has 158 units serving 170 residents, and another 400 clients are supported each year in a homeless outreach program. Fife House recently received The Casey Award, which celebrates individuals and organizations across Canada that demonstrate leadership in the fields of HIV/AIDS and/or social justice. The award was created in tribute to June Callwood and named after her youngest son.

It is estimated that the Greater Toronto Area has 18,000 people living with HIV/AIDS, and these are only those individuals who are aware of their status. This represents about 25 per cent of all the cases in Canada. Today Fife House provides 80 per cent of the supportive housing available to people living with HIV/AIDS in Toronto. Fife House operates four residences/programs that offer 24-hour support services through a network of qualified staff and volunteers. At any given time, residents/clients can call on these support services. For more information, go to: www.fifehouse.org.

– 30 –

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