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VANCOUVER

As HIV-positive men age, a unique Vancouver program provides an 'oasis' for those who have lived through the worst days of AIDS

By **Tessa Vikander** Star Vancouver
Thu., July 18, 2019 4 min. read



VANCOUVER— Frederick Williams witnessed the worst of the AIDS crisis.

Diagnosed with HIV 33 years ago, Williams survived and went on to become a chef and then a harm-reduction workshop leader. But most of his friends weren't so lucky, and they died from AIDS-related illnesses.

"I've gone through waves of friends," the 55-year-old said. "In the 80s I lost all of my friends and then in the 90s I lost all of my friends again."

ARTICLE CONTINUE

On a Wednesday morning in July, Williams came to the Dr. Peter Centre for breakfast, like he does most days. He also brought his laundry from home and put it in the washing machine.

By day, the centre is a bustling hub for those living with HIV, and it provides free meals, counselling, massage therapy, a living room, music lessons and more.

But it's the centre's evening program for gay and bisexual HIV-positive men over 50 where Williams has found a community.

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"I find the day time program is very loud," but at the evening program, "the guys that are over 50 are more settled down."

Williams is one of a growing number of men who are [aging with HIV](#).

By 2030, about 60 per cent of those with HIV worldwide will be older than 60, according to an estimate from the UC San Diego AntiViral Research Center.

Meanwhile, more than 55 per cent of the nearly 9,000 people living with HIV in B.C. who were “engaged in HIV care” were over the age of 50, according to 2016 data from the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. That compares to approximately 10 per cent, two decades earlier.

Scott Elliott, executive director of the Dr. Peter AIDS Foundation that runs the centre, said HIV specialists and caregivers hadn’t really considered the kinds of support needed for seniors with HIV until recently, because living a long life is a relatively new phenomenon for them.

“Before 20 years ago ... we didn’t really think about HIV as a chronic or ongoing lifelong disease. It was ‘you’re going to get AIDS and you’re going to die,’” Elliott said.

When the program began in 2017, Elliott said only one or two people were showing up. By the end of the first year, it had 18 to 20 regulars. Now, in 2019, nearly 40 men participate.

Williams describes Wednesday evenings as an “oasis” where he can reminisce about past sorrow and joy without shame.

“We have scars that a lot of people don’t understand. We saw it, we lived it, we weren’t sure if we were next. Having this group, we all have a common ground.”

According to the centre, there are nearly 600 gay and bisexual HIV-positive men in Metro Vancouver who could benefit from a similar program, yet it is believed to be the only one of its kind in Canada.



Up until the late '90s, Elliott said about 85 per cent of those being diagnosed with HIV were gay men, and doctors would tell them to “cash in any life insurance, go have fun, take care of yourself for the next year or two, because you’re not going to live much longer than that.”

Then came the life-altering antiretroviral medications. Although they are not a cure for HIV, if taken properly, they keep the virus count in a person’s blood stream so low that they can’t pass the virus on to another person.

They also keep people alive and allow them to age. But for those with HIV, getting old is more complicated.

For example, Elliott said people with HIV are experiencing dementia and bone loss at an earlier age than those without. Fear of discrimination from care providers or other seniors in mainstream seniors programming can cause some men to go back in the closet.

Another issue is isolation, a challenge common among seniors, but made worse by the fact that many of the men lost about half of their peer group 25 or 30 years ago, Elliott said.

“With isolation, folks aren’t taking their pills properly ... if you don’t take your meds, you will get sick.”

Those using the program are taking anywhere from one to 25 pills per day, Elliott noted.

Notably, many of the men who come to the evening program have also started using the day program as well, so Elliott said the need for seniors programming for HIV-positive gay men can’t be overstated.

On top of the fact that facing mortality brings up memories of losing loved ones to AIDS, these seniors also harbour trauma from the stigma of being gay.

“Someone who was in their 70s went through the whole homosexual movement when it was illegal, when it was a mental illness, they

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could have been in jail, in raids,” Elliott said. “So there’s all this residual trauma from that as well.”

Correction: July 19, 2019 — *A previous version of this story misattributed information about the number of people over 60 who will be living with HIV in 2030. The story has been updated.*


Tessa Vikander is a Vancouver-based reporter covering diversity, inequality and education. Follow her on Twitter: [@tessavikander](#)

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