

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ACT to Close After 42 Years of Service to Toronto's HIV Community in a bittersweet announcement as ACT brought together the community and forever changed Public Health and Patient Access to Medications

Thanks to groundbreaking advances in prevention and treatment, people living with HIV are living longer, fuller lives with new needs for support, beyond ACT's original mission.

Toronto, ON – September 12, 2025 - The AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) announced today that after more than 40 years of dedicated service, the organization will begin the process of winding down operations over the next six months by ACT's year-end of March 31, 2026. This bittersweet yet difficult decision comes after years of financial challenges, declining service user numbers, and significant changes in both the HIV landscape and the broader health care system.

"ACT is extremely proud of the contribution it has made in the fight against HIV and AIDS," said Ryan Lisk, Executive Director. "For more than four decades, we have been honoured to stand alongside thousands of people living with and affected by HIV, providing support, education, advocacy, and care. This decision was not made lightly, but it is the best course forward to ensure that our staff are supported, and our service users continue to receive the resources they need through other organizations. ACT began with the hope that at some point in the future it wouldn't be needed anymore which is why its bittersweet, and we are grateful to our community partners that are able to continue to serve the needs of people living with and at risk of HIV."

Like many HIV service organizations, and most major health charities, ACT has faced a combination of government funding challenges and steadily declining philanthropic support, especially since COVID. Many charities in Canada still have not recovered donation support since COVID because of the declining economy and increased cost-of-living. In 2003, ACT raised \$3.6 million through donations and fundraising; in 2025, projected philanthropy revenue is less than \$300,000. With rising costs and less revenue, ACT's current structure is no longer financially sustainable. ACT has spent the last nine months meeting with stakeholders, funders, labor management, as well as ACT's Board and management team to assess what is possible, and what is feasible for ACT in 2025, including mergers with other HIV organizations. This has been a time to assess the needs and

capacity of the organization and to make decisions based on the priorities of our service users and the communities we serve. In 2025, ACT's service users reflect the diversity of those most affected by HIV in Toronto. The majority (69%) identify as cis or trans men, with cis and trans women making up 31% of those we serve. ACT has over 200 women living with HIV accessing weekly programming. Our community is racially and culturally diverse: over one-third (35%) of service users identify as Black, another third (34%) as White, with significant representation from Latin American (13%), East Asian (8%), Arab/West Asian (5%), South Asian (3%), Southeast Asian (1%), and Indigenous (1%) communities. Service users also span all stages of adulthood, while only a small number are under 25, the majority fall between the ages of 26 and 65, with nearly a third over the age of 55. This range reflects both the progress in HIV treatment, allowing people to live long and full lives, and the evolving needs of an aging population.

ACT had half as many service users this year as it did just before COVID. 2026 was predicted to have less than a third of the service users of 2019. There are now only half as many ACT staff as there were two decades ago.

Before ACT's year-end on March 31, 2026, **ACT will work closely** with service users, staff, and partner organizations to ensure a smooth transition of programs where possible, and **to connect service users with the support they need for the future.**

A Changing HIV Landscape

When ACT was founded in 1983, AIDS was a crisis marked by stigma, long-term illness and often death, with an urgent need for care. Today, thanks to groundbreaking advances in prevention and treatment, people living with HIV are living longer, fuller lives. Daily medication, injectable treatment, and HIV PrEP have transformed care and prevention, while the principle of "undetectable = untransmittable" has changed the course of the epidemic. Many people still don't understand that a person living with HIV and undetectable viral load cannot transmit HIV, meaning condoms aren't needed to prevent HIV (but they are still useful for other STI's like syphilis, chlamydia, and gonorrhea). And medications still aren't available to everyone; continuing to be a barrier for marginalized groups most at risk for HIV.

Yet HIV is not over. New infections still occur, particularly among marginalized communities, and the needs of people living with HIV have shifted toward mental health, housing, aging, and social supports. **The**

future of HIV service delivery lies in coordinated, comprehensive models of care such as those offered by HQ Toronto and Women's Health in Women's Hands. As well, there is still need for smaller tailored HIV services, in Toronto, that government and community donations should support to meet the targeted needs of those most affected by HIV.

"We are saddened by the news that ACT will be ceasing operations after 42 years of extraordinary service to our community. As we honor its powerful legacy, we recognize that the landscape of HIV-related services is evolving, and the current and future needs of people living with and affected by HIV are changing as well" says Dr. Kevin Woodward, the Executive & Medical Director of HQ and an Associate Professor of Medicine in the Division of Infectious Diseases at McMaster University. "ACT, alongside other HIV organizations and activists like AIDS ACTION NOW, forever changed patient access to medications and support. Activists pressured governments, insurance and pharmaceutical companies for more patient-centered care during the worst years of the AIDS epidemic. They played a lead role in pushing government agencies and drug companies to accelerate testing, lower costs of drugs and bring people with HIV/AIDS into a collaborative process for developing solutions including models of care, community support services, and drugs."

Dr. Woodward, went on to say, "the work is not over, but because of ACT and its allies, the path ahead is clearer, stronger, and filled with hope."

"ACT's story is also the story of a community that refused to be silent, that built services from the ground up, and that achieved extraordinary progress in the face of adversity," said Rodney Lock, Board Chair. "ACT will be remembered as a leader in the HIV and queer communities. We have so much to be proud of over our 42-year history. We advocated for AZT, treatment access, and developed some of the leading sexual health campaigns and resources. And 40 years later, HIV treatment access, stigma, and prevention have significantly changed."

"As ACT winds down over the next 6 months, we want to showcase our legacy by looking back and celebrating through media stories, retrospectives and a **community event in March (to be announced in the new year)**. We will **celebrate** the programs, volunteers, milestones, events like **Fashion Cares, AIDS Walk** and **SNAP**, and recognize our donors, allies, and **how ACT forever changed the Toronto HIV community by bringing it together** and reminding the world of the magnitude of loss that the gay community (and all communities affected by HIV) have faced, but

also celebrating the strength and resilience we have built” says Ryan Lisk, Executive Director.

About ACT

Founded in 1983, ACT has been a leader in Toronto’s HIV response, providing vital programs and services in prevention, care, and support for people living with and affected by HIV. From frontline services to advocacy and public education, ACT has played an essential role in reducing stigma, advancing human rights, and shaping health care policy in Canada. In the 1990’s, ACT grew to become Canada’s largest HIV service organization, benefiting from the devotion of its accomplished staff, thousands of committed volunteers and the many, many thousands of people living with HIV who have and continue to form the backbone of the ACT community.

www.actoronto.org

For media inquiries, please contact:

Daniel Paquette, dpPR

dprr@rogers.com; Office 647 874-2176, Cell 416 559-2694

Historical Backgrounder:

Note: please be advised the content below is from archival sources, and all quotes are from historical events (not current quotes)

For nearly as long as HIV has been in Toronto, ACT has been here to help. Formed by a small group of community activists during the summer of 1983 as the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT), was a response to the panic and fear surrounding an unknown illness. Little was known about AIDS at the time, but a terrible stigma was attached to those who had it, and nothing was being done to help them.

Since then, **ACT grew to be Canada's largest HIV service organization**, benefiting from the devotion of its accomplished staff, thousands of committed volunteers and the many, many thousands of people living with HIV who have and continue to form the backbone of the ACT community. AIDS had first entered public consciousness two years earlier, in the summer of 1981, as a "rare cancer" found in 41 gay men in New York and San Francisco. The first Canadian case was reported nine months later, in March 1982.

A year later, epidemiologists began to warn about the potential for the outbreak to rapidly increase the number of AIDS cases in Toronto. In response to this and the growing panic, the Hassle Free Clinic and Gays in Health Care sponsored a forum at TMU (previously "Ryerson") that was packed, welcoming over 300 people to hear from community leaders and look forward to what should be done. This forum would eventually lead to the founding of ACT.

Doug Elliott, a lawyer and one of ACT's first board members, recalls when AIDS was little more than a rumour: "Like a lot of people at the time in the gay community in Toronto, I really did think AIDS was a remote American problem and did not have much to do with my life... what perhaps had been blown out of proportion by the religious right, who were using it as just another stick to beat up on the gay community."

Gay men in Toronto were beginning to fall ill with AIDS. With little recourse to effective, supportive health care, they often died quickly. As local media began to publish more fear-mongering articles about AIDS, ***The Body Politic***, a gay and lesbian news magazine in Toronto, decided to mount a response. Gay activist **Michael Lynch** and epidemiologist **Bill Lewis** began writing articles to counter the misinformation.

One of the first stories *The Body Politic* published about AIDS was titled

"AIDS: discounting the promiscuity theory." Written by Lewis, it was a radical departure from the messages provided by U.S. gay activists, some of whom were promoting the idea that men were overloading their bodies with common sexually transmitted infections through multiple sexual encounters. The theory went that this eroded their immune systems.

Lewis believed this was morality dressed up as bad science. HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, hadn't been discovered yet, but there was enough evidence to know that AIDS was being passed through blood and through needle use. If that was the case, it meant that a single exposure might be enough to spread the disease.

In March of 1983, **Ed Jackson**, the editor of *The Body Politic*, received a call from the Canadian Red Cross. The Red Cross wanted to know what message they could provide to people about AIDS and blood donation. Recognizing that much-needed leadership on the issue of AIDS in Ontario would have to come from civil society, Jackson decided to call a meeting. He invited Michael Lynch, lawyer **Harvey Hamburg**, **Dr. Randy Coates**, **Robert Trow** of Hassle Free Clinic, and five others.

At this meeting, this group of ten formulated a public statement about blood donations, but they also began to plan for some kind of entity that would provide ongoing support for people with AIDS. This meeting became, de facto, the first meeting of what would become the AIDS Committee of Toronto.

A 25-year Legacy of The World's Leading Fashion Luminaries

Fashion Cares was an annual fundraising gala and fashion event in Toronto, created in 1987 to raise awareness and funds for the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It was Canada's largest fundraiser for the fight against AIDS and at one time the world's largest Fashion AIDS fundraiser and at over 1,000 volunteers, making it the **largest volunteer event in North America**.

It was a collaborative effort of the local and international fashion and business communities including Fashion Cares artistic director **Phillip Ing**, **Frank Angelo and Frank Toskan from MAC Cosmetics** and global fashion media icon Jeanne Beker, featuring elaborate runway shows, galas, auctions, and musical performances. MAC Cosmetics became a title sponsor in 1994, significantly increasing the event's profile and fundraising potential. Held at various venues, it became a major fixture of Toronto's social scene.

Performers and celebrity attendees included **Elton John**, Shirley Bassey, **Linda Evangelista**, Pamela Anderson, fashion designers **Dean and Dan Caten of DSQUARED2**, Claudia Schiffer, Petula Clarke, Ashley MacIsaac, Jann Arden, Janelle Monae, Sting, Michelle Yeoh, Gwyneth Paltrow, Gloria Gaynor, Jennifer Holliday, Lil' Kim, Dan Aykroyd, **RuPaul**, **Patti LaBelle**, Feist, **K.D. Lang**, Katy Perry, and **the Scissor Sisters**.

Fashion Cares played a crucial role in uniting the community and provided a sense of purpose and hope in the fight against the disease. **Fashion Cares concluded its run in 2012 after 25 years and over 75 thousand guests and volunteers, having raised nearly \$12 million for ACT.**

23 Years of SNAP – Photographic Art Auction

2025 marked the 23rd anniversary of SNAP, ACT's annual Photographic Art Auction to raise funds for people living with and at risk for HIV. Each year a dedicated team of volunteers and art enthusiasts curated an amazing collection of photographic art from across the globe.

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