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**Regional
HIV/AIDS
Connection**

**SERVING PERTH, HURON, LAMBTON, ELGIN,
MIDDLESEX AND OXFORD COUNTIES**



**Regional
HIV/AIDS
Connection**

**Annual Report
2020-21**

ACTS OF COMMUNITY CARE

Regional HIV/AIDS Connection (RHAC) is community-inspired and dedicated to positively impacting the lives of individuals and diverse communities living with, at-risk for, and affected by HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C.

**SERVING PERTH, HURON, LAMBTON, ELGIN,
MIDDLESEX AND OXFORD COUNTIES**

With great respect, we acknowledge the regions we serve as the traditional territory of the Algonquin, Anishinaabe, Attawandaron, Haudenosaunee, and Leni-Lunaape Peoples. The three First Nations communities closest in proximity to this agency are: Chippewa of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Munsee-Delaware Nation. We are grateful to collaborate with Indigenous communities and Indigenous knowledge as we foster healing together.

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This annual report covers the activities of Regional HIV/AIDS Connection during the fiscal year of April 1, 2020—March 31, 2021.

Executive Message

CONNECTION IS THE CONSTANT

Fiscal 2020/21 was an extraordinary and challenging experience, to say the least. This year's Annual General Report (AGR) celebrates our remarkable staff and their ability to deliver on our mission during a global pandemic.

With deeply felt gratitude, we want to thank the resilient team at RHAC for their absolute dedication to our mission throughout the year. As the world faced profound uncertainty, the RHAC staff forged ahead in our mission! As an organization that deliberately includes the word "connection" in our name, it was concerning to see the global pandemic causing significant obstacles to vital connections with the people we serve. Marginalized people have come to depend on day-to-day connections with our staff and services. We are often a lifeline for many. Stay-at-home orders, or the worries of going out into the world, presented new obstacles for the team to make connections. In the face of these obstacles, our frontline and leadership teams leaned into their inherent strength, resiliency and ingenuity as they figured out how to serve our mission in the context of a changing world.

The Community Relations and Education department was deployed to work from home. Yet that didn't stop their resolve to advance HIV/HCV prevention and awareness across our region. They continued efforts to support migrant workers (many stranded in Canada due to the pandemic); offer HIV prevention and testing information to guys into guys; advance HIV stigma awareness through a digital storytelling initiative led by people living with HIV (PLWHIV) and funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF); and apply for every available grant opportunity to mitigate barriers to access and connectivity.

The staff at the John Gordon Home donned their personal protective equipment (PPE) and continued to provide vital care and support services at the "Home with a Heart." Given the pandemic, we extended stays for vulnerable residents to ensure their continued safety from COVID-19.

Meanwhile, the HIV/HCV Support Services team launched a home delivery initiative to ensure people living with HIV continued to receive food from Country Cupboard, our supplementary food bank program. PLWHIV social support groups went online to ease social isolation and the creative team worked their magic to foster continued connection.

Our capacity to offer these virtual opportunities was strengthened by grants that helped provide access to tablets, phones, and internet services. The annual Client Holiday Dinner went on the road and we delivered a traditional holiday dinner and gifts to the homes of over 90 PLWHIV in our region.

The Carepoint and Counterpoint harm reduction programs adjusted services to operate in compliance with COVID-19 safety protocols. Without interruption, we continued to provide lifesaving overdose prevention and wrap-around services in Carepoint. We provided on-site and mobile harm reduction services while expanding Counterpoint satellite sites to increase access to harm reduction materials.

Our Administration team continued to provide all organizational supports, both on-site and remotely. In addition, they took on the task of PPE procurement, inventory management, and infection prevention and control (IPAC).

RHAC is standing strong because of individual and collective staff contributions. We have saved lives; we have provided important support and HIV/HCV prevention services; and we have strived to overcome any obstacles in making vital connections to the community we serve. We thank each and every staff member for their remarkable contributions during this past year. Most of all, we thank our clients for continuing to trust us with their care and support during these challenging times.



Brian Lester
Executive Director



Tina Ranta
Board President

HIV/HCV SUPPORT SERVICES

Providing Care, Support and Safety to Clients

This year, RHAC remained committed to delivering quality care and trusted supports to the people we serve. The HIV/HCV Support Services team continued to provide physician referrals, testing and treatment options, education sessions, and referrals to housing, healthcare, mental health and addiction supports—all tailored to COVID-19 safety standards. This year, the HIV Support Services Team welcomed 36 new intakes. Through the United Way Elgin Middlesex's Love in a Global Crisis Fund, we were also able to connect 6 displaced students and newcomers to clinic treatment.

 **295** clients living with HIV  **14** residents living at JGH  **196** clients living with HCV

Creating a Safe Haven at The Home with a Heart

This year, the HIV/HCV Support Services team's connections to the John Gordon Home program were strengthened to enhance transitional stays for residents living with HIV and HCV. During the COVID-19 pandemic, JGH also responded to a COVID-19 outbreak among 3 residents. Thanks to the support and guidance of MLHU, the outbreak was declared over on April 15 with zero hospitalizations and no serious illnesses experienced.

Keeping Connected During COVID-19

In response to COVID-19, our HIV Support Services Team transitioned to online social and support groups. Our HIV-Positive Women's Group received packages of craft supplies, worksheets, items for cooking and baking, and other activities. Thanks in part to the London Community Foundation's (LCF) Emergency Community Support Fund (ECSF), we provided 61 clients with electronic devices, including: laptops, tablets and refurbished cellphones to increase accessibility related to virtual service access and programming, and to stay connected in the face of COVID isolation and HIV stigma.

Hepatitis C Care Team

This year, we served 2,222 HCV client interactions. On World Hepatitis Day, the Hep C Care Team (a partnership between LIHC and RHAC) completed 20 point of care tests, connected with 160 individuals, and distributed harm reduction supplies and 250 grab bags.

Culturally-Safe Connections

Supported by LCF's ESCF grant, we employed an African, Caribbean and Black (ACB) Peer Coordinator to offer culturally-relevant outreach to 25 ACB PLWHIV (with a 200%+ increase in engagement)! Staff members also completed San'yas Indigenous Cultural Safety Training and linked our Country Cupboard food bank program to Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy (OAHAS) peer workers to facilitate greater community access.

Feeding the Needs of our Community

Improving clients' food security was a key focus of ours during the pandemic. Financial supports from LCF's ECSF, Sisters of St. Joseph, and emergency food boxes from Feed Ontario helped us meet significant food security needs. This year alone, we provided over 8,000 meals to PLWHIV! Meanwhile clients accessed our Country Cupboard food bank 228 times (with home deliveries made available during lockdown). Working with the MLHU Outreach Team, we made 50 additional food deliveries to PLWHIV.

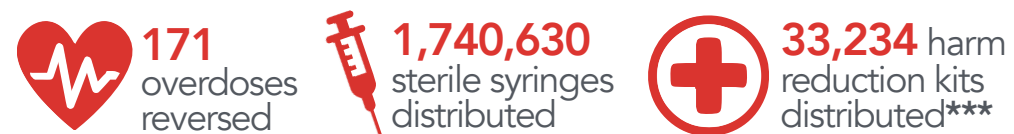


RHAC hand-delivered our annual Client Holiday Dinner to 90 clients living with HIV. Continuing this tradition during COVID-19 ensured that people facing the challenges of HIV, stigma and food insecurity enjoyed a warm holiday meal with loved ones.

HARM REDUCTION

Preventing Overdose and Opioid Poisoning

Since the onset of COVID-19, Canada has seen increasing rates of drug-related deaths due in part to the toxicity of the illicit drug supply. In fact, 2020 was the worst year on record for opioid-related deaths. On average, 17 Canadians per day died from opioids,* with a total of 175 lives lost across the 6 counties we serve.** Throughout the pandemic, RHAC responded to a rising demand for harm reduction equipment, serving a total of 27,524 client visits to Counterpoint, our Needle and Syringe Program (NSP). In November 2020, RHAC was notified that the Government of Ontario approved a permanent location for our Carepoint supervised consumption at 446 York St., with construction slated to begin at the end of 2021 or early 2022. Thanks to our Harm Reduction programs and collaborations, we continued to reverse overdoses, reduce substance-related harms, and connect clients to vital care and supports.



Meeting People Where They're At

Innovating our ability to meet people where they are at is central to our success as a leader in harm reduction. RHAC was pleased to join a collaboration between LIHC, the Middlesex-London Paramedic Service, and Addiction Services of Thames Valley. The H.O.M.E (Health Outreach Mobile Engagement) program delivers primary care, harm reduction, addiction services supports, basic needs, and wrap-around care services at four locations across the city to marginalized individuals who face barriers to accessing traditional models of care.



Supporting Innovations in Drug Safety

RHAC participated in Health Canada and Impact Canada's Drug Checking Technology Challenge by partnering with this year's winner, Scatr Inc., whose drug-checking technology is designed to detect dangerous contents in drugs in as few as 60 seconds! Many overdoses are accidental, as a result of not knowing the dose or contents of a drug. Fast and effective drug checking could help prevent countless deaths related to drug poisoning.

Piloting a Harm Reduction Peer Program

In January, we launched a peer engagement program thanks to 2nd-round funding from the ECSF (London Community Foundation). Across the year, over 20 Peers who use substances were engaged to meet an increasing need for harm reduction resources throughout the pandemic. They were paid hourly; given warm meals; and provided a safe space to work with others and support harm reduction efforts in their community.

In Support of Safe Supply and Safer Communities

Safe supply is an evidence-based harm reduction practice that provides a legal and regulated supply of drugs, in place of a toxic street supply. In November, RHAC's Board of Directors released our agency position statement, urging all levels of government to expand access to safe supply to prevent harms and deaths related to opioid toxicity.



Carepoint staff came together in the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation on Orange Shirt Day (September 30) to honour the experiences of residential school survivors and the Indigenous children who never returned home.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND EDUCATION

Raising Awareness, Increasing Access to Testing

This year, we delivered 151 HIV/HCV education and prevention activities. We also delivered the second year of our award-winning *Find Your Reason* campaign to raise HIV prevention capacities and support increased access to HIV testing among 200+ guys into guys, and diverse ACB communities with a focus on migrant workers. Collaborating with Specialty Rx Solutions, RHAC continued to deliver our PrEP Clinic during the pandemic. We also welcomed the approval of HIV self-testing in November by Health Canada, marking an important step forward in HIV testing and prevention.



5,381 cloth face masks donated for client use



6,129 unique visitors to both *Find Your Reason* campaign websites

Our Unstoppable Volunteers and Supporters

RHAC suspended volunteer drop-ins during COVID-19. But that didn't stop our volunteers from finding ways to safely support our mission: Whether it was Canada Sews Middlesex-London and volunteers donating 5,381 masks to our clients; community members making 1000+ scarves for HIV awareness; or TD Bank Group's food drive and King's University College car wash fundraiser! We also met (for the 10th year in a row) with the Brescia University College's Community Development Class, who made harm reduction kits in support of our clients.

Supporting Regional Migrant Workers

Many migrant workers, who we continued to build strong relationships with through our *Find Your Reason* campaign, were stranded in our community last winter due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. With funding from the Emergency Community Relief Fund (United Way Elgin Middlesex), we provided 70 displaced migrant workers with essential winter clothing, groceries, personal protective equipment (PPE) and sexual health resources.



Councillor Arielle Kayabaga joined RHAC's Multicultural HIV Prevention Coordinator Mercy Nleya-Ncube and ACB Peer Support Coordinator Vimbayi Munonyara for a virtual Women's History Month discussion.

Programming Goes Virtual

RHAC adapted our programs to keep community members connected during quarantine. We moved our Pride events online for a total of 1,910 viewers, and made our Open Closet group virtual for 23 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. We also joined virtual celebrations for Black History Month, as well as Women's History Month in which we shared virtual discussions with Councillor Arielle Kayabaga, Debbie Owusu-Akyeeah (Executive Director of the Canadian Centre for Sexual and Gender Diversity), and PLUMP! Sessions. We also collaborated with Black London Network and Black Gay Men's Network on virtual health resources.



1,030 participants engaged across 153 community meetings

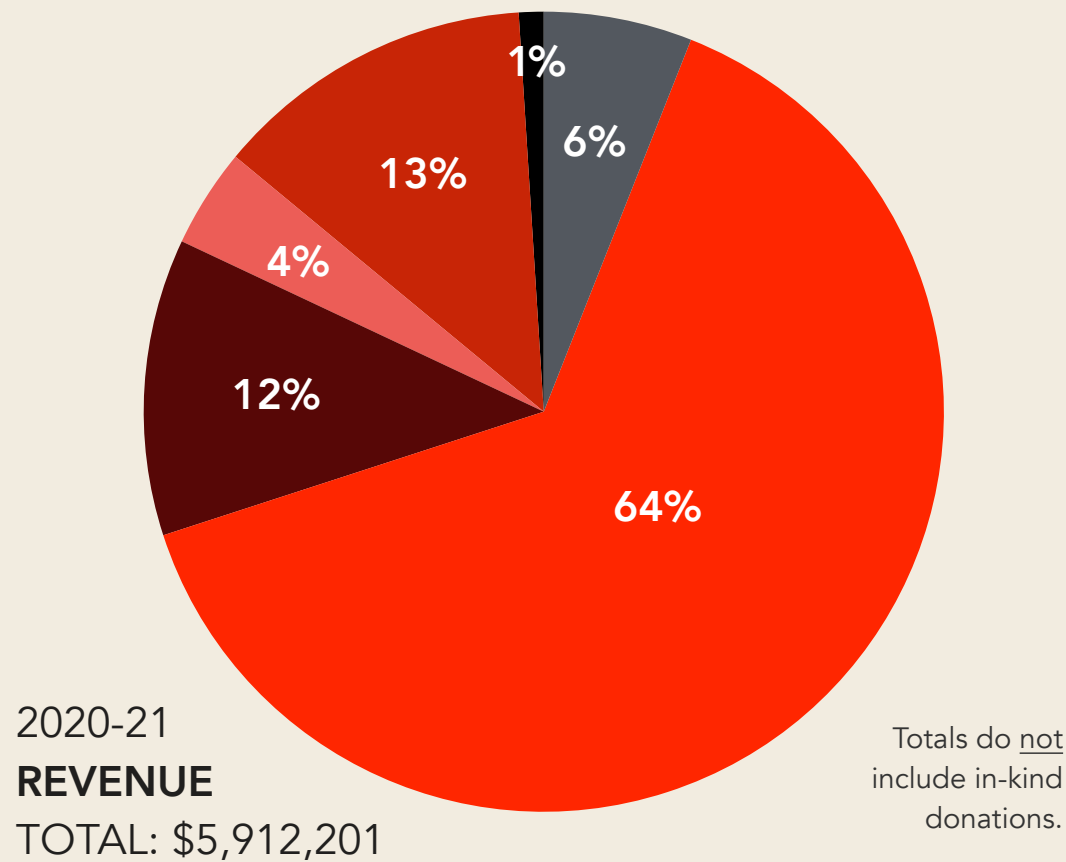








~\$130,000 in grants secured in support of clients

Coming Together, Keeping Apart

COVID-19 changed how we bring communities together. Events could no longer be in-person. And while we missed having our community close, we made their safety our top priority. This year, we innovated long-standing events by shifting to an online fundraiser for A Taste for Life (raising \$13,000 in support of clients) and hosting a virtual World AIDS Day Vigil featuring musical guest and inaugural Red Scarf alum: Jully Black.

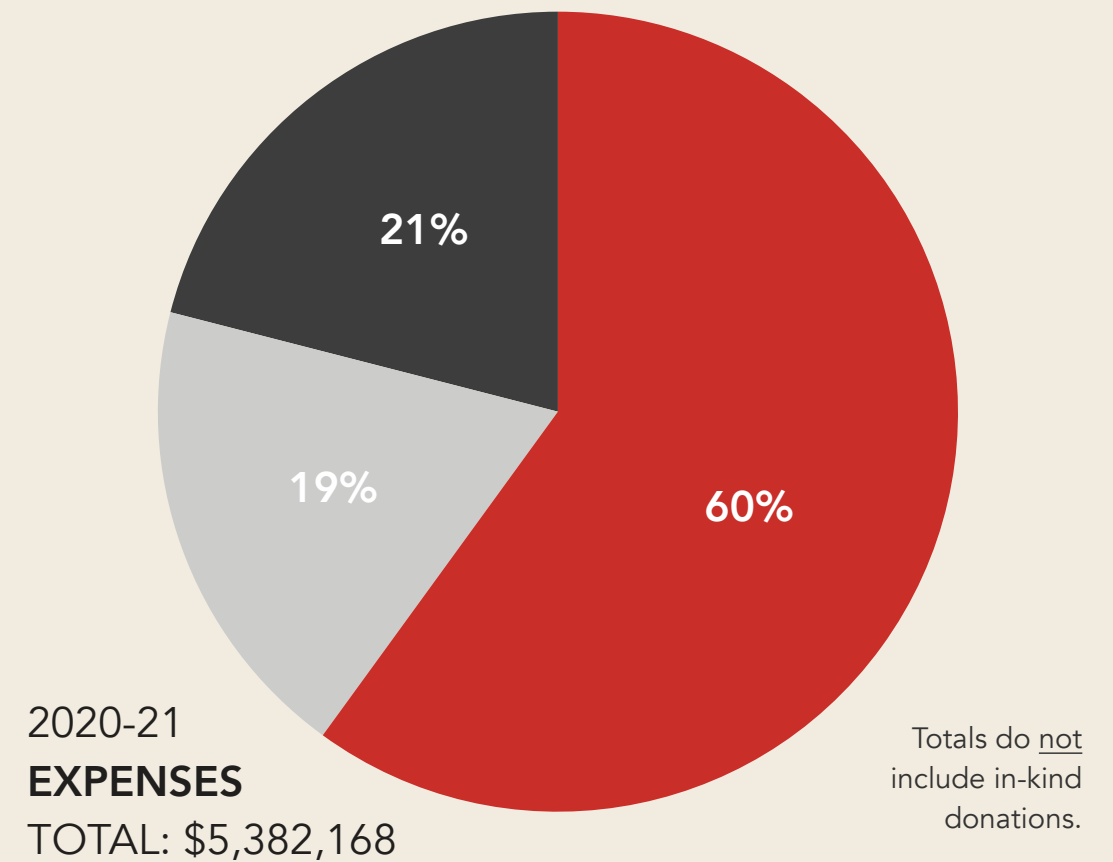
FINANCIALS






	Federal Funding: \$339,435		Donations + Fundraising: \$249,481
	Provincial Funding: \$3,775,762		Admin + Other Recoveries: \$759,792
	Municipal Funding: \$725,777		Occupancy Fees: \$61,954

Fiscal 2020-21 Statement

The year ending March 31, 2021, RHAC noted an approximate 10% budget increase from the previous year. This is mostly associated with the funding adjustments to support the annual operation of the Carepoint program. This year, we were selected for a random audit related to our Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) funding. The results were extremely positive, with zero adjustments recommended.



	Staffing: \$3,215,614
	Program: \$1,018,743
	Fixed: \$1,147,811

As a result of our growing agency, and based on recommendations from our 2019/2020 Organization Assessment, we on-boarded our first Manager of Human Resources. This role will support all aspects of our organization human resource needs and has already proven invaluable to our operation. We are grateful to our many funders who provided both new funding and also allowed us to reallocate existing funding to adapt to emerging issues during this global pandemic.

THANK YOU

Our Funders

Public Health Agency of Canada
AIDS Bureau, Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care
Housing, Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care
Southwest Local Health Integration Network
Employment and Social Development Canada
City of London
Middlesex-London Health Unit

Our Grantors

Canadian Red Cross
Johansen Larsen Foundation
London Community Foundation
 COVID-19 Response Fund
 The Emergency Community Support Fund (ECSF)
Ontario Trillium Foundation
United Way Elgin Middlesex
 Love In a Global Crisis Fund
 The Emergency Community Support Fund (ECSF)
Sisters of St. Joseph

Our 2020/21 Board

Tina Ranta — President
Kimberley Graham — Vice President
Hamza Serdah — Treasurer
Mariam Hamou — Secretary
Kelsey Adams
Sue Hawking

Jennifer LaJoie
Chris Moss
Nancy Griffiths
Kelly Muhsin
Elizabeth Mailloux
Alexa Duggin

On behalf of our staff and Board, RHAC would like to express our deepest gratitude to each and every one of our community partners and supporters. Thank you to the people we serve, our dedicated volunteers, and the sponsors, donors, grantors and funders who help to make our free client programs and services possible.