Survey Reveals Human Rights Abuses in Alberta

A survey of people with HIV/AIDS in Alberta suggests that there are serious deficiencies in the provision of pre- and post-test counselling to people undergoing HIV-antibody testing. Survey respondents also identified human rights abuses in employment, housing, and other areas.

Almost three-quarters of the people with HIV/AIDS who participated in a recent human rights survey in Alberta reported that they did not receive counselling before they were tested for HIV. More than a third of the respondents said that they did not receive counselling even after being told that they had tested HIV-positive. The results suggest that some medical professionals in Alberta are failing to provide adequate pre- and post-test counselling, despite the existence of ethical guidelines stating that such counselling must be provided.

The survey was conducted by means of a written questionnaire administered to 34 people with HIV/AIDS from across Alberta who attended the Expanding Your Horizons Symposium, a conference for people with HIV/AIDS held in October 2002. The survey was a preliminary step in a new Human Rights Project at AIDS Calgary. The project aims to develop rights-based educational, empowerment, and advocacy tools for use by people with HIV/AIDS and service providers in the Calgary region.

Almost a third of those who participated in the survey reported being treated unfairly by employers or co-workers as a result of their HIV status. Respondents described being terminated by employers, being asked to quit, and having their hours severely reduced. Fifteen percent of respondents reported having problems finding a place to live due to their HIV status; two respondents reported being evicted or harassed by landlords. As Alberta human rights legislation prohibits discrimination on the basis of a disability, such treatment is in clear contravention of the law.

About a quarter of the respondents reported having difficulty accessing health care, for reasons ranging from inadequate access in rural areas to difficulties finding a general practitioner willing to provide treatment. About half the respondents reported breaches of confidentiality concerning their HIV status, either at the hospital or at work.

More than a third of the survey participants had spent time in prison. Among this group, 42 percent reported difficulty accessing harm-reduction materials – including condoms, bleach, and clean needles – while in prison, while 25 percent said they had problems accessing HIV medications.

Jessica Leech is the Human Rights Worker at AIDS Calgary. For further information on the survey and on AIDS Calgary’s Human Rights Project, contact Ms Leech at jleech@aidscalgary.org. Survey results are also available on AIDS Calgary’s website via www.aidscalgary.org/. The Human Rights Project is funded by the Alberta Lotteries Fund through the Human Rights, Citizenship, and Multiculturalism Education Fund.