



HIV COMMUNITY LINK
annual report 2020-2021





hello

Letter from Our Executive Director and Board Chair

No one has been immune to the effects of the global pandemic over the past year, and HIV Community Link (HIVCL) staff and clients were no exception. It has been a challenging year. We have experienced client deaths and community grief due to the current drug toxicity and opioid crisis across Alberta, have had to creatively adjust our service delivery models due to public health restrictions, and recently experienced funding losses for our harm reduction and sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBI) prevention and education programs in Medicine Hat and Lethbridge.

The mental health impact of the isolation experienced by many of our clients is also top of mind for all of us. In addition, the emotional toll of the losses we have experienced as an organization represents a major concern for our leadership team and our Board of Directors.

Despite the numerous challenges of the past year, HIVCL staff and clients have shown tremendous resiliency. We achieved so much together in 2020, not the least of which included stepping into the community of Lethbridge between October 2020-May 2021 to help address a gap in services in the areas of harm reduction and STBBI prevention, education and support. Until March 31, 2021, we were able to support over 1,800

vulnerable contacts in the community of Lethbridge to resources such as food and hygiene supplies, safer substance use supplies, naloxone kits, and safer sex supplies. We also provided emotional support and case management services to those living with HIV and/or hepatitis C, as they were left without this service due to the closure of their local HIV organization.

Although the pandemic somewhat sidetracked the work of our 2020-2023 Strategic Plan, we are excited to move forward and embrace our identity as an agency that provides harm reduction services and supports with a primary focus on sexual health and substance use. Honouring our legacy and ongoing commitment to HIV work, we have engaged in a comprehensive consultation process with our clients, community stakeholders and service providers, and we are looking forward to the next step in HIV Community Link's journey.

We believe in the right of all people living with or at risk of HIV and other STBBI to be treated with respect and dignity and have access to low-barrier prevention services and care. HIV Community Link is committed to supporting them wherever they are in their personal journey, and we feel fortunate to be considered a place of belonging and a welcoming community.

Sincerely,

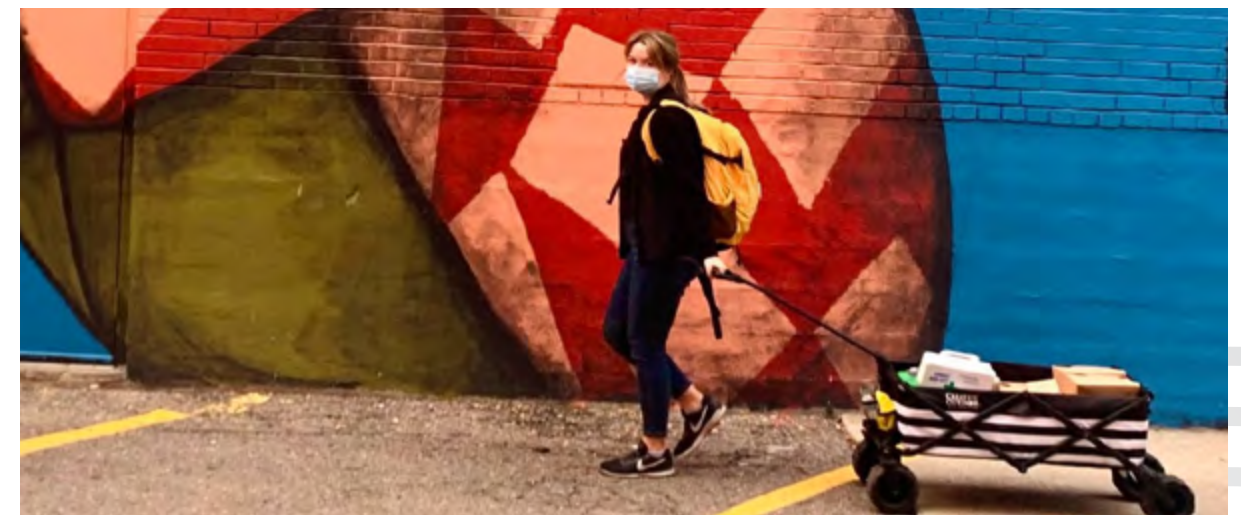
Katie Ayres and Andrew Matthews

about our work

Building on a 38-year legacy, HIV Community Link's programs focus on prevention, education, and support. Working in Calgary and Southeastern Alberta, our organization is dedicated to offering wraparound services to achieve long-term outcomes for people at risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBI) through sexual health and substance use. Based on a harm reduction philosophy, we meet clients

where they are, free of judgment, and help improve their current situations.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, we adapted our services to meet the needs of our community, starting virtual services and delivery of basic needs and other supplies. We continue to offer in-person services and have increased outreach services to reach those who do not have the option to connect online.



CALGARY

HIV Support Services

The COVID-19 pandemic created an increase in crisis throughout the community with many individuals being traumatically triggered and reminded of the HIV epidemic from the 1990s. Several new clients connected for one-on-one supportive counselling opportunities to help them through these difficult times. HIV Community Link (HIVCL) experienced an **increase of 80% in newly registered clients** between October 2020 to March 2021, compared to the previous six months.

Outreach opportunities to address basic needs and provide supplemental supports through in-community delivery of emergency food hampers and personal hygiene supplies increased our ability to build meaningful relationships with clients this past year. Services were provided to 102 unique registered clients living with HIV in Calgary over this past year, with 30% of them accessing basic needs supports (e.g. housing, food, financial supports). Being able to respond effectively and quickly to these needs allowed us to safely connect with our isolated clients to better understand individual context and develop support strategies to help them meet their needs throughout the pandemic.

HIV Peer Support

The HIV Peer Support Program delivered **225 peer navigation sessions** this past year, primarily in a virtual format. Many of our clients come from collective cultures where face-to-face connection is used to build relationships, and the COVID-19 public health

restrictions created barriers for many people who wanted to connect with peer support in-person rather than online. Despite this, the Peer support groups continued to be offered and the Positive Connections peer support group started hosting virtual dinner events, which helped create social connectedness in a time when participants could not meet in-person as a group.

HEAT (*Gay, Bi, and other Men who have sex with Men*)

The HEAT (gbMSM) program adapted well to virtual program delivery over the past year, and successfully added new platforms, such as Grindr, to expand program reach. Some program highlights include the addition of online outreach, and testing clinics that were relocated to the HIV Community Link location in Calgary. The venue transition enabled testing clinics to expand service to trans men, who had previously experienced barriers to access.

Through grassroots level engagement and community partnerships, the HEAT program is exploring multiple opportunities to engage the community in order to increase education, safety, and enhanced prevention work.

Drumbeat (*African, Caribbean and Black communities*)

In collaboration with the National CHABAC Project, the Drumbeat Program created and implemented a project called 'Ties that Bind' this year which focused on connecting African, Caribbean, and Black leaders and service providers through group dialogue to encourage candid, culturally informed, and community-led discussions about sexual wellness and wellbeing. The project was created to not only educate on HIV prevention, but to also enrich community relationships



and reduce stigma related to topics of HIV, sexual wellness, anti-black racism, and colonization.

Other program successes this year included online podcasts with four local leaders who are making positive change against HIV throughout Calgary in celebration of Black History Month in February. The recent creation of an African Youth on HIV/AIDS group is another exciting new initiative for Drumbeat, as one of the program's intentions is to engage, educate, and disseminate meaningful and relevant knowledge resources to ACB youth at risk of or affected by HIV, hepatitis C (HCV), and other related STBBI, at a grassroots level, and to engage young individuals as future community leaders.

Strong Voices (*Indigenous communities*)

Food insecurity, service navigation, and social and cultural connections are barriers on the journey to holistic wellness for many of our Strong Voices clients, and these barriers have certainly been amplified by the pandemic. During the last year, Strong Voices incorporated more street outreach, which resulted in over 2,000 contacts and helped strengthen the support network of some of the most vulnerable Indigenous Calgarians.

The opioid overdose crisis continues to disproportionately affect Indigenous people in Calgary. Over **3,800 safer consumption supplies** have been distributed via the Strong Voices Program in the past year to help prevent transmission of blood borne infections. Distribution also builds rapport, identifying program staff as supportive and safe individuals and allowing opportunities for service uptake. Among clients who actively use substances, there continues to be an increased need for crisis intervention and support due to trauma, grief, and loss of peers and loved ones.

Shift (*People involved in sex work*)

The Shift program continued to work diligently throughout the pandemic to improve the health, safety, and wellbeing of sex workers within the City of Calgary. Public Health restrictions placed upon the program due to the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged the Shift staff to find creative and innovative ways to support our community. Shift program staff increased regular evening mobile outreach events in order to safely enrich our connections with more vulnerable sex workers who work and live on the streets. The program had over **1,200 contacts with people involved in sex work**, distributed more than 23,500 safer sex supplies, and provided ~130 hours of emotional support to clients. In addition, we expanded the existing partnership with Alberta Health Services - Safeworks team to increase outreach service offerings, which resulted in mobile outreach teams that could provide wraparound supports and address medical, health, and safety needs immediately during outreach events.





MEDICINE HAT

Safelink (People who use drugs)

At the Safelink drop-in centre, a harm reduction approach is used to reduce the risks associated with drug use. The Harm Reduction Outreach and Peer Support workers continue to make connections, build relationships, create pathways to care, and provide people who use drugs with life-saving harm reduction supplies. Safelink saw a significant increase in demand for harm reduction services this past year, with a 69% increase in the distribution of inhalation supplies. There were **1,332 outreach interactions**, with over 126,000 needles and 15,700 inhalation supplies distributed. These supplies are critical in helping to prevent the transmission of blood borne infections such as HIV/HCV.

The Overdose Prevention Program nurse and educator worked to reduce the number of deaths caused by opioid overdose by training people who use drugs, friends, family, and service providers how to recognize the signs of an overdose and how to respond to a suspected overdose, and provided access to life-saving Naloxone kits. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Overdose Prevention nurse transitioned to an outreach model, meeting clients on the street to address addiction and physical health needs, and the Naloxone educator adapted the training modules to be delivered on online platforms. This transition was largely successful; however, the important hands-on element of training was missing this year, including the ability to practice handling the kit. Our Safelink team distributed

over **2,200 Naloxone kits** and trained approximately 500 people in Medicine Hat on the use of Naloxone, helping to save lives during the worst year on record for overdose deaths.

A change in government funding for the South Zone had an impact on some of our services in Medicine Hat, and Naloxone training and distribution services have transitioned over to Alberta Health Services as of June 1, 2021. Due to other sources of funding, we will continue to provide harm reduction services in Medicine Hat, including needle debris clean-up and education, safer sex and safer substance use supply distribution, and peer support for people who use substances.

Well (People who are pregnant or at high risk)

The Well Program with HIV Community Link in Medicine Hat operates from a harm reduction lens, providing pre-conception and perinatal care to people of reproductive age and ability who use drugs, experience homelessness, or are otherwise marginalized. Providing support without the condition of abstinence creates trust and safety within health care environments and improves health outcomes for parent and child. With the support of a Registered nurse and Pregnancy Support worker, Well provides medical assessment and intervention, referrals to mainstream medical and recovery-oriented services when appropriate, system navigation, and advocacy. Well also provides safer sex supplies and contraception options at no cost, as well as sexual health information and education. Through these activities, program staff minimize barriers to care, emphasize the clients' intrinsic capacity to reach their health and wellness

goals, and ensures client-centered care is integrated throughout the Program.

With in-office supports limited to comply with public health recommendations, and with clients generally isolating, disconnecting, and experiencing additional barriers to accessing care, Well Program staff were challenged to identify more creative ways of connecting with current clients and other individuals at risk. As such, Well transitioned to operating a primarily outreach-based service model. The Well Program connected with **348 vulnerable women** in the Medicine Hat community this past year, providing information relating to the Well Program, as well as sexual health/STBBI education and harm reduction supplies.

LETHBRIDGE

In the Fall of 2020, HIV Community Link was asked to provide support in Lethbridge due to the gap in services for people living with/at risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted and blood-borne diseases with the closure of ARCHES. Our team provided eight months of direct service delivery in Lethbridge (October 2020-May 2021), and was able to support more than **2,600 contacts** through outreach and distributed over 24,000 harm reduction supplies to help reduce the risk of HIV and hepatitis C in the community. In addition, 1,375 Naloxone kits were handed out by our staff to help reduce instances of overdose in Lethbridge. We are proud of the support our team was able to provide in our short time delivering services in Lethbridge, and we look forward to supporting Alberta Health Services as they expand their services in the community.

ALL LOCATIONS

Capacity Building & Education

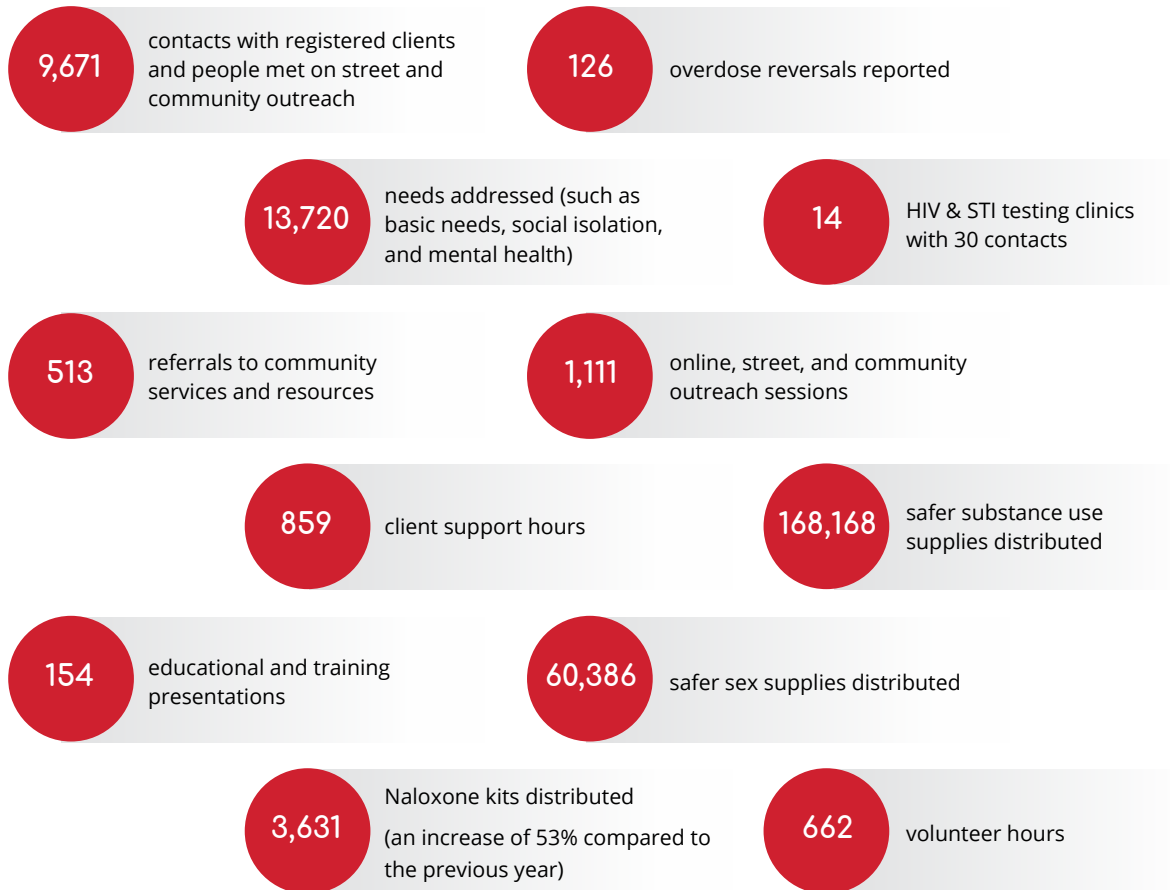
Our capacity building model shifted this past year to utilizing online platforms to better meet the training needs of service providers and the community. Our trainings were also redesigned to incorporate best practices such as enhanced visual aids, additional aural materials, and interactive, critical thinking activities. Service provider trainings were modified from single-day training events to shorter, multi-day trainings, reflective of research suggesting shorter attention spans within virtual settings. A total of 154 education and training sessions were delivered over this last year on topics such as HIV Transmission, Testing and Treatment, Human Rights & HIV, Harm Reduction Principles and Practices, Naloxone Education, and Shifting Perspectives, Sex Work.



by the numbers

2020 - 2021

Thank you for being the champions of our work: Empowering choices. Engaging communities. Ending transmission.



our stories

Many clients share their life experiences and the importance of the support they receive through our agency. The following stories speak to the needs of our clients, sometimes in life-threatening situations. All names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

DELILAH

Delilah came to Canada from Africa in 2017 to support her father, who was battling cancer. She had previous nursing experience and was able to help in so many ways. She did not want to go back to her first country, where she did not feel safe as a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community living with HIV. Completing the required paperwork for immigration was overwhelming and confusing, and her first attempt at refugee status was not successful. After four years of struggling to find ways for her HIV medication to be delivered to Canada, Delilah sought our help and became a registered client with HIV Community Link in the second part of 2020. With the support of an immigration volunteer and our team, Delilah has now been granted refugee status and is covered under the interim federal health card, support that she says “provided life to her.”



AMY

Amy registered with Shift at the beginning of 2020 when she was living on the streets, and her life and wellbeing were being impacted by substance use. She entered our program with no regular income, no family supports, numerous physical health concerns, and a warrant out for her arrest.

Through the ongoing support from our Shift team, Amy has seen many positive changes in her life. She now has a family doctor whom she trusts and who is working not only to address her physical health needs but also with Shift to get Amy connected to appropriate addiction treatment options. Amy is currently on income support and actively working with our team to create a sustainable budget to help manage her finances. Through referrals from Shift to legal guidance services, Amy has been able to have her warrant lifted, and her parole officer has praised her hard work over the past few months.

We have seen extensive growth in Amy's overall wellbeing and self-esteem. Amy told us how empowered she has become since becoming a Shift client and that she finally feels she has a safe space to receive support.





instead of a success story

Reflecting on individual client successes has proved a difficult ask for our Medicine Hat team this year. With the combined impacts of COVID-19 and the increase in substance use deaths from 11.8 per 100,000 population in 2016 to a staggering 51.7 in March 2021, losing clients has been a constant. Approximately 15 individuals who regularly access services have recently died by overdose, a loss acutely felt across the community. While working within these dual public health crises, every outreach contact, every phone call check-in, every knock on our door, and every new day we hear from our clients feels like a success. This year, we have learned to measure success differently and take time to remember and celebrate meaningful moments with our clients.

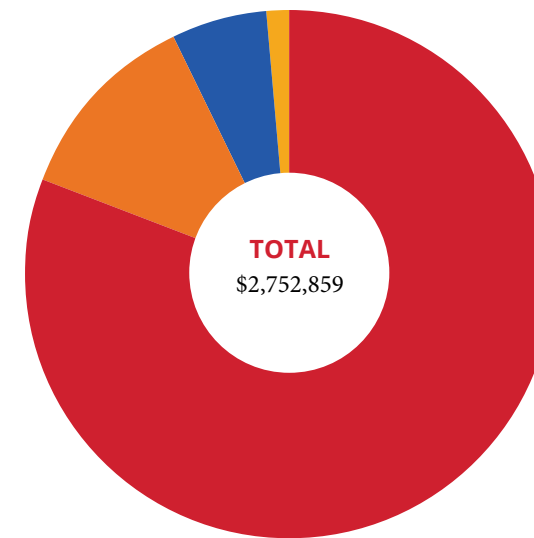
We remember how they knew everything happening in the community and how they would share their knowledge with our team. They wanted to ensure others were aware of dangers and to keep them safe. How they came to see us daily, often walking long distances to do so. How they loved strong coffee and how they would come in regularly to try new jokes on us. They had an infectious laugh. How they talked with us frequently about personal safety. They told us we were helpful and that they appreciated that we did not judge them. How they trusted us with their physical and emotional wounds and how rewarding it was to earn that trust.

Those lost to overdose were much more than just numbers; they touched our lives. We feel privileged to have walked beside them for a while and find peace in knowing we provided moments of safety, dignity, and compassion for the stigma, judgement, and fear that our clients experience. With every client who allows us

in and with every loss, we are reminded of how critically important these services are. Our team is dedicated to helping and advocating for people at risk, and we are incredibly grateful for the continued support of our funders and community partners who allows us to continue doing so.

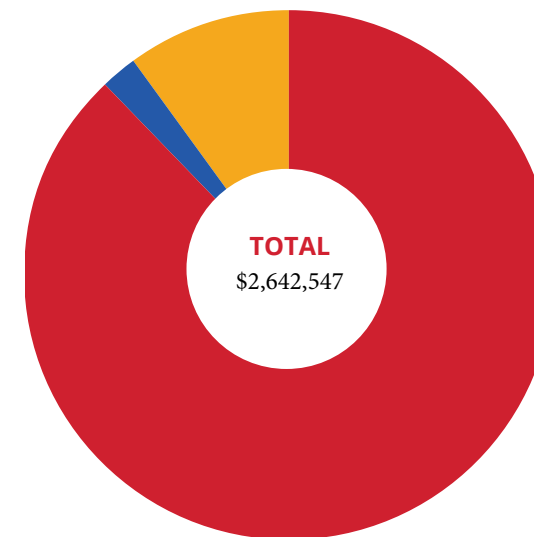


financials



REVENUE

- Government Funding: 73.17%
- Grants and Foundations: 10.93%
- Fundraising: 5.17%
- Other: 10.74%



EXPENSES

- Service and Delivery: 89.04%
- Fundraising: 2.04%
- Administration: 8.91%



thank you

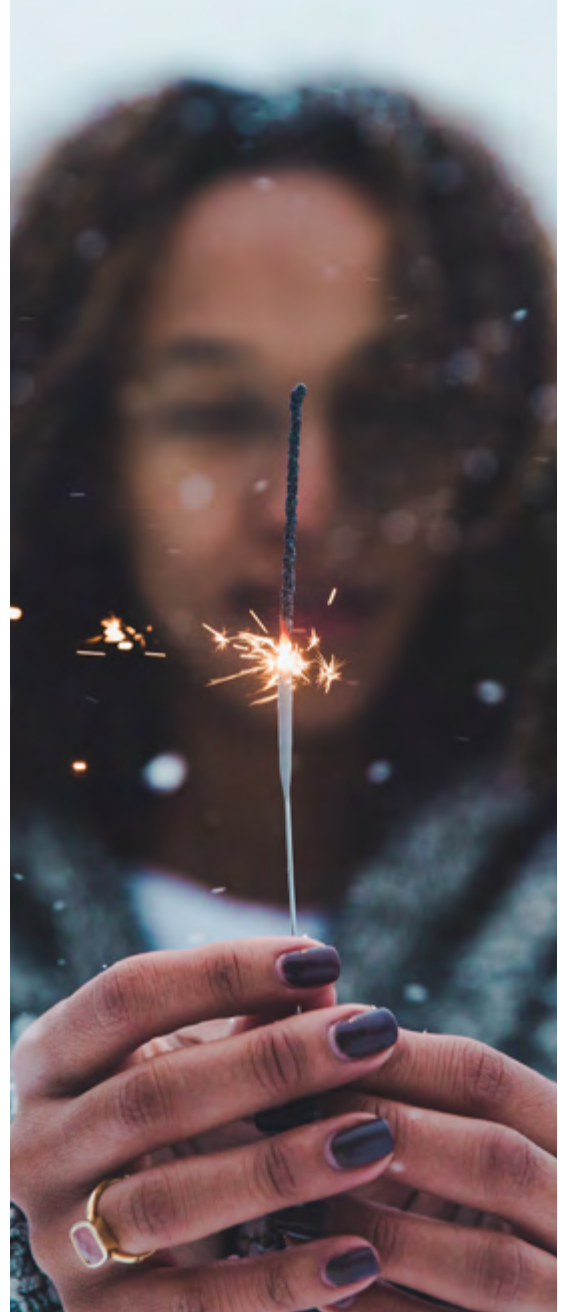
Thank you to all our donors, sponsors, volunteers and supporters for making our work possible.

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- 770 CHQR
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- MAC Cosmetics
- Redback Wine Imports
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- William Joseph Communications

FUNDERS

- Anonymous Donor
- Alberta Community Council on HIV
- Alberta Health
- Alberta Health Services
- The Calgary Foundation
- Canada Summer Jobs
- Canadian Women's Foundation
- The City of Calgary, Family and Community Support Services
- Public Health Agency of Canada
- United Way of Calgary and Area
- RBC Foundation



HIV COMMUNITY LINK
prevention + support + advocacy

CALGARY

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MEDICINE HAT

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