



Dear Unsung Heroes of the Downtown East Side,

Every year the Pacific AIDS Network (PAN) organizes a Forum for persons living with HIV/AIDS at its fall conference. The Forum is a chance to problem-solve and develop ideas towards a new yearly group consensus priority for PAN to champion over the next year. One of the 2015 priorities given to PAN from the Forum was to write a thank you letter to the unsung heroes of the down town east side, who have provided lifesaving and supportive care throughout the 30 some years of the epidemic.

The HIV/AIDS movement in Vancouver has been lengthy, colourful, and rich with well-known names and faces who have been instrumental in promoting awareness and in pushing for better health care and human rights for those living with HIV. Let us also remember the great strides made in fighting the epidemic also happen at the local community level, in neighborhood organizations and with individuals who are rarely thanked for saving the lives of people living with HIV.

The downtown eastside has long been a pivotal community in the history of the epidemic, with historical high levels of infection rates, for a myriad of interventions and services addressing HIV/AIDS, and for key related services such as access to harm reduction and supervised consumption sites. Despite the many challenges posed by HIV, hepatitis C, mental health and substance use, and the overarching contexts of poverty, homelessness, and violence – the downtown eastside is also an area characterized by social activism and community resilience.

Although we rarely see their names in print or their faces on the news, there is a cadre of people who have been working tirelessly for decades to support people living with HIV. These are the people we address with this letter to say: *thank you for saving our lives*.

To the nurses, doctors, and other front-line healthcare providers, who take extra time to listen and care even when they've already seen dozens of other patients that day, thank you.

To the staff and volunteers of countless organizations who serve hot meals on cold, rainy days, thank you.

To the outreach workers who walk the streets giving out harm reduction supplies and who seek us out when we haven't been in touch, thank you.

To the shelter employees who stay up all night to help ensure we have a safe place to sleep, thank you.

To the support workers and advocates who raise hell to see that our rights are upheld, thank you.

To the folks in government who work in a system they don't always agree with so that health and social services are provided, thank you.

We might still have a ways to go before we “get to zero” here in Canada, but until then, we acknowledge and appreciate these passionate and diligent people – the ones who make headlines and the ones who work quietly in the background – who continue to both support people living with HIV and those most at risk, and who continue to ensure that HIV/AIDS is an issue our society cares about and addresses.

On behalf of the persons living with HIV/AIDS 2015 forum PAN fall conference delegates, thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Darren Lauscher". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Darren Lauscher

Former Board Chair

Pacific AIDS Network