



News Release Communiqué

For immediate release

HEALTH ACTIVIST IN PRISON WINS 2008 HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD FOR HIV/AIDS WORK

OTTAWA, June 16, 2008 — A federal prisoner and health activist is the recipient of the 2008 *Canadian Award for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights*, the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and Human Rights Watch announced today. The Award, which recognizes outstanding individuals and organizations that protect the rights and dignity of people living with or affected by HIV and AIDS, will be presented at a public reception and ceremony in Ottawa this evening.

As a peer health counsellor, Peter Collins has been conducting HIV prevention education behind bars since the late 1980s. His efforts have also included providing support to prisoners living with HIV and hepatitis C, and advocating for better health care and HIV prevention services — including harm reduction measures — in prisons. Collins is currently serving his sentence at Bath Institution, a medium-security federal prison near Kingston, Ontario that houses more than 300 male prisoners.

“Today’s award not only recognizes one person’s efforts to make a difference in stopping this epidemic, but also highlights how much still needs to be done to ensure prisoners’ basic human right to protect themselves against HIV and hepatitis C,” said Richard Elliott, Executive Director of the Legal Network. “One immediate priority is to reinstate the safer tattooing program; another is for Canadian prisons finally to implement needle exchange programs.”

Prisoners throughout Canada still have no access to clean needles. Studies in Canada and elsewhere report much higher levels of HIV and hepatitis C infection among prisoners than among the population as a whole, and that sharing of equipment, including makeshift tools to inject drugs, is common in prisons. The World Health Organization, and the Ontario and Canadian Medical Associations, among others, have recommended that needle exchange programs be implemented in prison settings. The Public Health Agency of Canada recently reviewed the evidence for Correctional Services Canada (CSC) and concluded such programs make sense as a public health measure.

“A prison sentence should not result in infection with a potentially fatal disease,” said Elliott. “Needle exchange programs have worked very successfully for years

in prisons in other countries, yet the federal government has categorically refused to act, rejecting the recommendations of medical experts, UN agencies and its own Public Health Agency.”

“Peter has been involved in fighting for the health and human rights of prisoners, including access to harm reduction programs, for most of his 25 years in prison,” said Giselle Dias of the Prisoners’ HIV/AIDS Support Action Network (PASAN), the community-based organization that nominated Collins for this year’s award. “We’re very pleased that his work has been recognized, and hope that it raises awareness of how often prisoners’ health is disregarded and their human rights ignored.”

While Collins’ advocacy has often put him at odds with prison authorities, his expertise as a peer educator on the inside has also helped the prison system take positive steps, such as the ground-breaking “safer tattooing” pilot project initiated by CSC in six institutions after its surveys showed many prisoners get tattoos while incarcerated. That pilot project was later cancelled by Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day in December 2006 before the first-year evaluation was complete.

“Prisoners have the right to adequate health services, but their access to such services is unreasonably restricted by prison authorities,” said Rebecca Schleifer, Advocate for the HIV/AIDS Program at Human Rights Watch. “Denying prisoners access to HIV prevention measures such as needle exchange programs that are available outside prisons not only ignores good public health practice but it also violates basic human rights standards.”

For more information about the Awards, see www.aidslaw.ca/awards.

About the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca) promotes the human rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research, legal and policy analysis, education, and community mobilization. The Legal Network is Canada’s leading advocacy organization working on the legal and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.

Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org) is an independent, nongovernmental organization that conducts regular, systematic investigations of human rights abuses in 80 countries around the world. Human Rights Watch addresses the human rights practices of governments of all political stripes, of all geopolitical alignments, and of all ethnic and religious persuasions. It defends freedom of thought and expression, due process and equal protection of the law, and a vigorous civil society; it documents and denounces abuses of internationally recognized human rights. Its goal is to hold governments accountable if they transgress the rights of their people. Human Rights Watch began in 1978, and

maintains offices in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, London, Brussels, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Tashkent, and Johannesburg.

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AWARDS FOR ACTION ON HIV/AIDS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The Awards for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights were established in 2002 by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and Human Rights Watch.

The Awards highlight outstanding contributions that decrease vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and protect the rights and dignity of those infected and affected.

Recipients of the award are nominated by their peers in recognition of their excellence and long-term commitment to work having a direct impact on HIV/AIDS and human rights issues — in particular work relevant to marginalized individuals and communities. The award selection committee consists of past recipients and representatives of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and Human Rights Watch.

The Awards are presented annually to one Canadian and one international recipient — either an individual or an organization.

This year's Canadian recipient is Peter Collins, a prisoner and activist. Mr. Collins is receiving the award for his longstanding advocacy for the health and human rights of Canadian prisoners, including those living with and affected by HIV.

The international award will be announced at the XVII International AIDS Conference in Mexico City in August.

Past recipients

2007 **Ruth Carey** — lawyer and AIDS advocate

2007 **HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic (Ontario)** — legal service for low-income people living with HIV/AIDS in Ontario

2006 **Stella** — Montréal-based sex workers' rights organization

2006 **Gareth Williams** — leading Jamaican AIDS activist

2005 **Al McNutt** — Canadian AIDS educator, gay rights activist and founder of Truro AIDS Outreach, Nova Scotia

2005 **Humanitarian Action** — health services and advocacy for sex workers, street children and people who use drugs in St. Petersburg, Russia

2004 **Megan Oleson** — Vancouver street nurse and activist

- 2004 **Pivot Legal Society** — legal advocacy organization in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside
- 2004 **Thai Drug Users' Network** — drug user organization active in all four regions of Thailand
- 2003 **Laurence Stocking** — Canadian prisoner and AIDS activist (awarded posthumously)
- 2003 **AIDS Law Project** — South African legal advocacy organization
- 2002 **Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users** — one of the largest drug user organizations in the world
- 2002 **Dr. Wan Yanhai** — leading Chinese AIDS and human rights activist

Visit www.aidslaw.ca/awards for biographical information on past recipients.

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