

SITUATING DIRECT-ACTION AIDS ACTIVISTS:

The Development of Organizational Responses to Vancouver's HIV Epidemic

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HISTORIES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS have frequently foregrounded and valorized radical forms of political organizing, while leaving more moderate forms of mobilization at the margins.¹ This is also the case within scholarship on the HIV epidemic in Canada and the United States, where direct-action AIDS organizations have typically loomed large.² Epitomized by the confrontational, visibly queer, and sensational street activism of groups such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), these organizations emerged in the mid- to late 1980s in major cities across Canada and the United States as a response to the inaction and antipathy of mainstream governmental and medical

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¹ Martin Meeker, "Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001): 79–80, 88–90, 116.

² Non-scholarly work includes: *How to Survive a Plague*, dir. David France (New York City: Sundance Selects, 2012); *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*, dir. Jim Hubbard (New York City: 2012); Ann Silversides, *AIDS Activist: Michael Lynch and the Politics of Community* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003); Tim McCaskell, *Queer Progress: From Homophobia to Homonationalism* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016). Scholarly work includes: Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: US Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Michael P. Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship: AIDS Activism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997); Benita Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA: Anti-AIDS Activism in Los Angeles from the 1980s to the 2000s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

institutions amid the growing health crisis and rapidly rising death toll.³ Crucially, they were also preceded by earlier forms of grassroots community mobilization, including AIDS service organizations (ASOs), that have not been centred in many HIV histories.

Drawing from oral history interviews and a variety of archival sources, this article explores the connections between moderate and direct-action responses to the HIV epidemic in Vancouver and traces the emergence of AIDS activism from approximately 1983 to 1992. In doing so, it highlights that direct-action responses to the epidemic would not have existed without earlier forms of more moderate HIV organizing. In fact, these streams of political mobilization had more in common in terms of their goals and desired outcomes than many scholars have previously suggested. The impact of activist organizations, such as the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation (CRHL) and ACT UP Vancouver – a chapter of the larger international ACT UP movement – was significant, but they built on the political foundation established by the city’s earlier ASOs through their caregiving networks and safe-sex education programs. These ASOs, including AIDS Vancouver and the Vancouver Persons with AIDS (PWA) Coalition, frequently engaged in political work, which is surprising given that their funding structure demanded that they maintain an apolitical façade. While the development of community responses to the epidemic in Vancouver mirrored and was undoubtedly influenced by developments in other Canadian and US contexts, political mobilization in Vancouver was shaped by the local political conditions faced by the city’s gay community, particularly the socially conservative and homophobic policies of Bill Vander Zalm’s provincial Social Credit government. Ultimately, understanding the development of activist responses to the epidemic in Vancouver requires attention to shifting local politics and the interplay between activist and service organizations in the city.

HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, is a virus that can weaken the body’s immune system. When left untreated, people living with HIV can develop AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) when their immune systems are less able to counteract illnesses effectively. Today, effective treatment for HIV is readily available in Canada, but this was not the case when a mysterious illness among gay men in major urban

³ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 4, 5, 11, 55–56, 145, 178, 257–59, 263, 334; Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship*, 57–62; Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 3, 156–57, 160–62, 168–79; Cindy Patton, *Globalizing AIDS* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 20–21; Richard A. McKay, *Patient Zero and the Making of the AIDS Epidemic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 15.

centres was first reported in North American media in 1981.⁴ While the HIV/AIDS epidemic did not have the same immediate effects in Vancouver – located on the unceded and ancestral territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Sel̓il̓wiltulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations – as it had in major US cities, such as San Francisco or New York City, its impacts were immense.⁵ While a mere 36 AIDS cases had been diagnosed in British Columbia prior to 1985, the number of cases soon increased exponentially and reached nearly 1,000 cases by 1990 and 2,400 cases by 1998, resulting in 2,000 AIDS-related deaths. Most cases occurred in Vancouver, particularly among gay and other men who were having sex with men, with this population accounting for roughly 2,000 of British Columbia's AIDS cases.⁶ Indeed, during the worst years of the epidemic in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Vancouver had the highest per capita rate of AIDS diagnoses in Canada, reaching nearly double the national per capita average.⁷

At the time, British Columbia was also governed by the conservative Social Credit Party, which held power for all but the three years between 1952 and 1991. Beginning in 1986 under Bill Vander Zalm's leadership, the party took a socially conservative turn, rolling back discrimination and human rights protections for minorities, waging an attack on abortion rights, and promoting Christian family values. Vander Zalm's government also responded particularly negatively to HIV/AIDS, even in comparison to other Canadian governments.⁸ Indeed, Vander Zalm's government refused to fund safe-sex campaigns, delayed provincial

⁴ Community AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE), "HIV Basics," <https://www.catie.ca/en/basics/hiv-and-aids>; "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals," *New York Times*, 3 July 1981, A20..

⁵ New York had approximately 6,500 AIDS diagnoses and 3,800 AIDS-related deaths by the end of 1985. *New York City HIV/AIDS Annual Surveillance Statistics 2014* (New York: New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2015).

⁶ The number of people living with HIV in British Columbia was much higher (approximately 9,400 as of 1998). See *HIV/AIDS Update: Year End 1998* (Vancouver: BC Centre for Disease Control, STD/AIDS Control, 1999), 2, 6, 10–11, 14; Health Canada, *AIDS in Canada: Annual Report on AIDS in Canada, December 1996* (Ottawa: Division of HIV/AIDS Surveillance, Bureau of HIV/AIDS and STD, LCDC, HPB, Health Canada, 1996), 7, 14–15, 18. Effective treatments for HIV emerged in 1996, which led to a steep drop in AIDS cases thereafter.

⁷ David M. Rayside and Evert A. Lindquist, "AIDS Activism and the State in Canada," *Studies in Political Economy* 39 (Autumn 1992): 55–56; Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship*, 43–44. For an overview of AIDS diagnoses by year, please see page 30 of [www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Statistics and Research/Statistics and Reports/STI/HIV_Annual_Report_2017_FINAL.pdf](http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Statistics%20and%20Research/Statistics%20and%20Reports/STI/HIV_Annual_Report_2017_FINAL.pdf).

⁸ Tom Warner, *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 154; Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 351–52; Gordon Hak, *The Left in British Columbia: A History of Struggle* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2013), 147–51, 162. Canadian scholars have emphasized how homophobia was embedded in Canadian society throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and shaped mainstream medical, governmental, and media responses to the

funding to AIDS Vancouver, and ultimately attempted to pass quarantine legislation that could be used to forcibly detain people who were living with HIV. Additionally, two Social Credit cabinet ministers, Health Minister Peter Dueck and Forests Minister Dave Parker, publicly blamed people living with HIV for getting the virus.⁹ British Columbia was also the only province in Canada not to fully cover the cost of AZT (azidothymidine) in the late 1980s, the only treatment available for HIV at the time, which rendered treatment prohibitively expensive for many PWAs. This meant that gay communities in British Columbia were particularly neglected, even within Canada, where per capita government expenditure on AIDS in the early years of the epidemic fell short of the modest expenditures in the United States and Britain.¹⁰ A provincial AIDS strategy did not exist in British Columbia until 1991. While the lack of provincial government intervention limited available funding, it created opportunities for local, progressive public health actors, such as leaders at the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC), to respond more autonomously.¹¹ Indeed, some of the narrators interviewed for this article were both public health workers and engaged in grassroots AIDS organizing. These frontline health care workers and public health professionals were important allies in early responses to the epidemic across major Canadian cities.¹²

Collectively, many gay men at the time viewed the hostility and inaction of the Social Credit government as homophobic and rooted in their perception of AIDS as a “gay problem.”¹³ Indeed, one Social Credit MLA suggested that gay men and people living with AIDS should be sent to a former leper colony near Vancouver Island or contained within a ghetto in Vancouver, and Vander Zalm himself publicly called

AIDS epidemic. See Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1996), 4, 83, 278, 347–48; Klassen, “Facing It Together.”

⁹ Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship*, 43–44, 47–48; Anne Mullens and Keith Baldrey, “AIDS Vancouver Denied BC Grant,” *Vancouver Sun*, 9 June 1987, A1; Anne Mullens, “AIDS Counsellor Cites Job Peril,” *Vancouver Sun*, 9 July 1987, B2; Nick Rebalski, “AIDS Activists Stage Protest at Fantasy Gardens,” *Vancouver Sun*, 5 September 1989, D12. As of June 1987, the provincial government had only provided \$45,000 to the organization, compared to \$50,000 contributed by the city and \$150,000 by the federal government.

¹⁰ Rayside and Lindquist, “AIDS Activism,” 37, 57; Brown, 43–44, 47–48; Barry D. Adam, “The State, Public Policy, and AIDS Discourse,” *Contemporary Crises* 13 (1989): 12.

¹¹ Rayside and Lindquist, 39–41, 57.

¹² Rayside and Lindquist, 57, 65, 67; Barry D. Adam, “Mobilizing around AIDS: Sites of Struggle in the Formation of AIDS Subjects,” in *In Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbians Encounter HIV/AIDS*, ed. Martin P. Levine, Peter M. Nardi, and John H. Gagnon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 25.

¹³ Don Hauka, “AIDS Inertia Hit,” *Province*, 26 January 1987, 5.

homosexuality a sin.¹⁴ Regarding Bill Vander Zalm's succession of Bill Bennett (the former BC premier), Richard, who wrote for the local gay and lesbian liberation periodical *Angles* throughout the 1980s and 1990s, recalls:

One of the first things that [Vander Zalm] did was [try] to cut back on abortion, and funding public schools and in particular [increasing] funding [to] Christian schools, which was his constituency. And along with that was very homophobic rhetoric and when they looked at the issue of AIDS their response was lock them up. And conservative cabinet members talked about locking up people with AIDS.¹⁵

Gordon, who worked for several years at AIDS Vancouver, also perceived the Vander Zalm government as homophobic: "The [Social Credit Party] were in power at the time ... [Its] brilliant idea was ... [to] basically, put us on a rock and let us die. So, there was a lot of hostility at the provincial level about gay information, how to have [safe] gay sex."¹⁶ While Vander Zalm recalls "[having] great sympathy for those affected with AIDS" in his memoir, his government's actions indicate otherwise.¹⁷

Vancouver produced the quickest grassroots response to the epidemic in Canada, starting with the formation of the country's first ASO, AIDS Vancouver, in January 1983. When AIDS activism moved in a more radical, treatment-based direction in the mid-1980s, Vancouver was also at the forefront with the establishment of the Vancouver PWA Coalition in 1986 (see Figure 1).¹⁸ Crucially, race, class, gender, and colonization profoundly shaped AIDS organizing in Vancouver, producing differentiated networks of care within the city. Indeed, most of these service organizations catered to the needs of gay white men in the city's West End, leaving many other groups affected by HIV – including women, People of Colour, and Indigenous communities in the Downtown Eastside – without access to these supports. ASOs catering to the needs of these communities eventually formed near the end of the period analyzed in this paper.¹⁹

¹⁴ Keith Baldrey, "Advocate of AIDS Colony Remains Mystery," *Vancouver Sun*, 30 March 1994, B5; Graham Leslie, *Breach of Promise: Sacred Ethics under Vander Zalm* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1991).

¹⁵ Richard Banner, AIDS Activist History Project (hereafter AAHP), interview by Gary Kinsman and Alexis Shotwell, 28 October 2014.

¹⁶ Gordon M., HIV in My Day, interview by Benjamin Klassen, 20 December 2017.

¹⁷ Bill Vander Zalm, *Bill Vander Zalm "For the People": Hindsight, Insight, Foresight; The Autobiography of British Columbia's 28th Premier* (BC: self-published, 2008), 254.

¹⁸ Rayside and Lindquist, "AIDS Activism," 55–56; Warner, *Never Going Back*, 163, 251.

¹⁹ John Paul Catungal, Benjamin Klassen, Robert Ablenas, Sandy Lambert, Sarah Chown, and Nathan Lachowsky, "Organising Care and Community in the Era of the 'Gay Disease': Gay Community Responses to HIV/AIDS and the Production of Differentiated Care Geographies

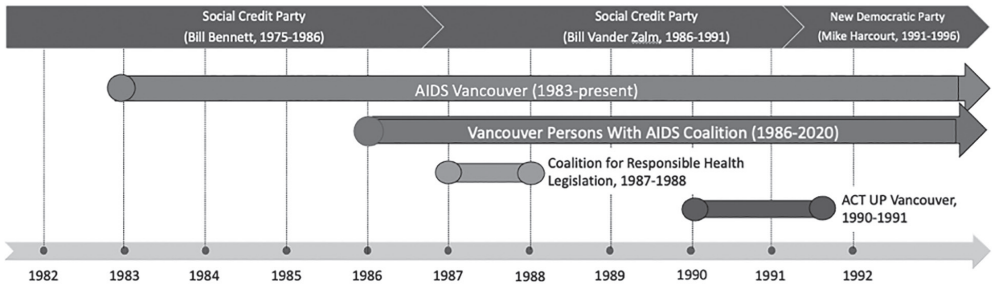


Figure 1. Timeline of Vancouver-based AIDS organizations.

Many scholars have examined grassroots organizational responses to the HIV epidemic in the United States and Canada and identified three types or “waves” of AIDS organizing: first, ASOs, who provided community education and support for PWAs; second, PWA organizations focused on treatment advocacy and meeting the direct needs of PWAs; and, finally, direct-action AIDS activist organizations.²⁰ However, scholars have debated the dynamics between various types of organizations, with some emphasizing divergence across groups. Deborah Gould’s analysis of ACT UP New York in *Moving Politics* positions AIDS activism as discreet as she claims that the gay community’s first responses to the epidemic were typified by ambivalence, shame, and respectability.²¹ Gould contrasts these less political ASOs with liberation-oriented activist organizations that emerged later in the epidemic amid intensification of government indifference, right-wing backlash, and virulent homophobia and, in many places, the threat of enforced HIV-testing and quarantine.²² Some Canadian scholars have similarly emphasized “two distinct tracks” of gay and lesbian organizing in Canada: first, a radical gay and lesbian liberation movement and second, an assimilationist, equality-seeking rights movement, which gained ascendance in the mid-1980s, and have viewed HIV organizing through this binary, with ASOs embracing assimilationism as they

in Vancouver,” *Urban Studies*, 28 January, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098020984908>; “Community: HIV/AIDS and Non-Stream Minorities Group Forms,” *Angles*, September 1992; “HIV Is Not Just a White Thing: Asian Support – AIDS Project,” *Angles*, January 1994; “Community: Black AIDS Network,” *Angles*, August 1993.

²⁰ Patton, *Globalizing AIDS*, 2–4, 11–17, 19–21; Warner, *Never Going Back*, 163–66, 248–53; Rayside and Lindquist, “AIDS Activism,” 49; Adam, “Mobilizing around AIDS,” 24.

²¹ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 24, 56–57, 61–62, 64, 71–73, 78, 80, 85–89. Patton also notes that, as organizations relied on government funding, they had to avoid overt political activities and shifted towards providing services to PWAs. See Patton, 11–17, 19–21.

²² Gould, 10–11, 49–50, 118, 121–22, 135–36, 150–53, 170, 236, 239.

secured government funding and direct-action organizations remaining firmly liberationist.²³

In contrast, other scholars have emphasized how different types of HIV organizations complemented each other and shared common goals. For example, Cindy Patton suggests that multiple overlapping waves of AIDS activism existed within US gay communities.²⁴ While ACT UP diverged from earlier community responses in its theatrical tactics and attempts to illuminate the underlying structures of power that produced the epidemic, Patton argues that it emerged within an existing milieu of community activism and ultimately was not distinctive.²⁵ Similarly, she emphasizes that various AIDS organizations in Canada shared common overarching goals, such as improving access to health care and advocating for gay rights, and frequently worked towards these goals in unison. While tensions existed between different types of AIDS organizations, especially in terms of their tactics, Rayside and Lindquist argue that these tensions were generally moderate and did not weaken or deradicalize grassroots AIDS organizing as a whole.²⁶ Building on this scholarship, my analysis focuses on how Vancouver's main AIDS organizations utilized differing political tactics to achieve overlapping goals.

Vancouver's AIDS organizations were also shaped by local, national, and international forces. Treatment information, models of grassroots care, and activist networks readily crossed the border from the United States and diffused across Canadian cities. For example, AIDS Vancouver's buddy program, in which trained volunteers provided emotional and practical support to a person living with HIV, was modelled after similar programs in major US cities.²⁷ However, in comparison to the United States, Canada's HIV epidemic emerged at a slower pace, within a universal, publicly funded health care context, and with greater variation across regions due to greater provincial control over health policy. Scholars have also argued that tension between AIDS organizations was less common due to a more coalitional approach to progressive

²³ Warner, x, 191–92, 247, 251–52. This concept of two separate strains of queer mobilization in Canada is also advanced by Manon Tremblay and is implicit in her discussion of AIDS organizing in Canada. See Manon Tremblay, "Introduction," in *Queer Mobilizations: Social Movement Activism and Canadian Public Policy*, ed. Manon Tremblay (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), 12, 19.

²⁴ Patton, *Globalizing AIDS*, 2–4.

²⁵ Patton, 3–4. Similarly, in *Infectious Ideas*, Jennifer Brier asserts that direct-action AIDS activists built upon the foundation of earlier community responses to the epidemic, including safe-sex interventions. See Brier, 1, 4–5, 14–15, 34, 43–46, 158–59.

²⁶ Rayside and Lindquist, "AIDS Activism," 38, 40, 64.

²⁷ Rayside and Lindquist, 43, 60–61, 69; Philip M. Kayal, *Bearing Witness: Gay Men's Health Crisis and the Politics of AIDS* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 4, 181.

organizing in Canada. Additionally, until 1990, all AIDS organizing in Canada was shaped by the lack of a federal AIDS policy.²⁸ Other scholars have emphasized how local historical contexts shaped responses to HIV/AIDS, stressing the importance of “attention to the politics of place in exploring the actions of social movement participants and the trajectory of organizations.”²⁹ Michael Brown’s analysis of the emergence of AIDS organizing in Vancouver in *RePlacing Citizenship* provides an important overview of local political conditions for my analysis.³⁰ These shifting local political conditions shaped the emergence of various forms of political mobilization in response to HIV in the city.

In order to understand the conditions that led to the emergence of direct-action AIDS activism in Vancouver, it is necessary to analyze the organizational and political work done by the city’s earlier ASOs, who established crucial forms of community infrastructure. The first of the city’s ASOs, AIDS Vancouver, appeared to be apolitical in providing services and education. It initially relied on community funding and, in the summer of 1984, registered as a charitable organization with Revenue Canada to expand its fundraising capabilities. Writing of this development in *Angles*, AIDS Vancouver noted that this would profoundly affect its future since Revenue Canada prohibited political activities for charitable organizations: “We must refrain from those kinds of actions which Revenue Canada considers to be political ... We do see our role as providing accurate information, discouraging hysteria and harassment ... contributing to research and, above all, supporting those who are psychologically or physically affected with AIDS.”³¹ Modest provincial funding of \$30,000 followed in October 1986, although this was only a small portion of the funds requested by the organization.³²

As AIDS Vancouver expanded and became reliant on government funding, it strengthened its commitment to avoiding overt political

²⁸ Rayside and Lindquist, 38, 64; Adam, “Mobilizing around AIDS,” 34; McKay, *Patient Zero*, 21, 189; Silversides, *AIDS Activist*, 86; Warner, *Never Going Back*, 161; David Rayside, *Queer Inclusions, Continental Divisions: Public Recognition of Sexual Diversity in Canada and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 3–7, 26. Canadian scholarship on the history of sexuality has often sought to challenge the universalism assigned to the US context. See Tremblay, “Introduction,” 27; Scott Rayter, “Introduction: Thinking Queerly about Canada,” in *Queerly Canadian: An Introductory Reader in Sexuality Studies*, ed. Maureen FitzGerald and Scott Rayter (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2012), xvi–xviii.

²⁹ Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA*, 9.

³⁰ Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship*, 27, 29, 58, 66, 68–69, 74–79, 189.

³¹ AIDS Vancouver, “AIDS Establishes Fund,” *Angles*, August 1984. Caregiving for PWAs was a crucial service provided by AIDS Vancouver and the PWA Coalition and has been explored in another manuscript. See Klassen, “Facing It Together,” 2.

³² Anne Mullens, “AIDS Group Gets \$30,000 Grant,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 22 October 1986, B1.

action.³³ Thus, AIDS Vancouver's avoidance of direct political action was not due to a fundamental, ideological embrace of respectability but, rather, to political necessity: if the organization wished to continue running its crucial support and education programs, it had to avoid overt politics. Given the ramifications of any political statements, AIDS Vancouver dealt with violations of the "no politics" policy strictly. For example, Bob Tivey, the long-time spokesperson for AIDS Vancouver, was fired in 1987 for making a political statement in response to a proposed provincial quarantine bill.³⁴

Although AIDS Vancouver complied with Revenue Canada's rules, its early safe-sex materials demonstrate its embrace of sexual liberation and rejection of respectability and mainstream norms. Empowering Vancouver's gay population through education and information was a primary goal of the organization from the outset as it held community information sessions beginning in 1983, provided safe-sex workshops starting in 1986, and produced various safe-sex promotion campaigns.³⁵ Admittedly, AIDS Vancouver's advocacy for safe sex was tentative when information on the epidemic's causes and routes of transmission were still scientific unknowns.³⁶ The pamphlets that AIDS Vancouver began producing in 1983 included the latest scientific knowledge on risk practices within a generally sex-positive, liberationist framework. However, because so little was known scientifically, the pamphlets recommended caution and behavioural change until more was known, as is illustrated provocatively in *Fight Fear with the Facts*:

Now more than ever, ignorance, hypocrisy and arrogance about sex are to be repudiated. If anything, be even more genuinely affirmative about your sexuality ... There is nothing "immoral" or "sinful" about celebrating your enjoyment of swimming in the ocean. If, on the other hand, your favourite beaches have posted undertow or oil spill warnings, it is prudent to avoid swimming in those areas as long as the signs are up. Like many people who are sexually active with many different partners, many gay men are currently having to face certain

³³ Fred Gilbertson, "Gov't Funds AIDS Vancouver Staff," *Angles*, November 1986. This funding helped to stabilize and institutionalize AIDS Vancouver's programming, which has contributed to the organization's longevity.

³⁴ Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship*, 29, 43, 51; Dan Guinan, "Bob Tivey Fired, Alan Herbert Resigns: Political Shuffle at AIDS Vancouver," *Angles*, September 1987; Ruth Teichroeb, "House Calls Soon," *Province*, 3 September 1987, 6.

³⁵ Robert A., HIV in My Day, interview by Benjamin Klassen, 5 October 2017; Paul Craik, AAHP, interview by Gary Kinsman and Alexis Shotwell, 30 October 2014; Hoddy Allan, "Safer Sex Workshop Succeeds," *Angles*, August 1986.

³⁶ Patton refers to this as "a period of extreme scientific uncertainty" (96), during which questions about what was "safe" persisted. See Cindy Patton, *Fatal Advice: How Safe Sex Education Went Wrong* (Durham, ND: Duke University Press, 1996), 96–100; McKay, *Patient Zero*, 17, 292.

health risks that are increasingly associated with sexual or lifestyle preferences. In the interest of public health, it is important to know what those risks are and how they can be minimized.³⁷

While this excerpt reads as vaguely moralistic due to the suggestion that promiscuity should be avoided until other means of minimizing risk were known, given the lack of medical knowledge, AIDS Vancouver's celebration of sexuality and disavowal of sexual "arrogance" is starkly nonjudgmental. Rather than renouncing gay sex, demonizing promiscuity, or promoting shame in order to preserve respectability and fragile mainstream acceptance, this pamphlet advocated intelligent sexual decision-making as a means of self-care and reasserted pride in gay identity, thus sowing the seeds of a liberationist response.³⁸ As more was known about the disease, this advice was replaced by an overt emphasis on condom use as an alternative to limiting sexual partners.³⁹

Given the widespread fear experienced by many within Vancouver's gay community in the early years of the epidemic, safe-sex education served as a foundational political response by promoting gay resistance and community cohesion and helping to alleviate immobilizing anxiety. Scholars have stressed the radical political importance of these early, grassroots safe-sex efforts, which reasserted sexual liberation, reaffirmed gay identities, and "offered alternatives to the dominant conservative ideology of the era." Thus, while service organizations were forced to adopt apolitical exteriors in order to receive state support, they continued to maintain a queer-affirming and resistive space.⁴⁰ Reflecting on the impact of safe sex, Gordon notes, "I think a lot of people were very afraid but when more knowledge became available and some of that fear was able to be tempered somewhat, [there was] a lot more opening to each other."⁴¹ These safe-sex practices were taken up by many within Vancouver's gay

³⁷ AIDS Vancouver, *Fight Fear with the Facts* (Vancouver: AIDS Vancouver, 1983). A similar message of caution is also promoted in AIDS Vancouver, *What Are My Chances?* (Vancouver: AIDS Vancouver, 1984).

³⁸ Brier asserts that community debate over the meanings of "safety" and "promiscuity" were framed by an overarching affirmation of sexual and gay liberation. See Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 14, 43.

³⁹ Bob Tivey, "AIDS Affects Everyone," *Angles*, July 1985; Bob Tivey, "Bath Issue Bubbles at AIDS Conference," *Angles*, January 1987; Allan, "Safer Sex Workshop Succeeds"; AIDS Vancouver, "What Are My Chances?"

⁴⁰ Brier, 43 (quote), 14, 34, 45-46; Cindy Patton, *Last Served? Gendering the HIV Pandemic* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 114; Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 42; Adam, "Mobilizing around AIDS," 28; Barry Adam, "The State, Public Policy, and AIDS Discourse," *Contemporary Crises* 13 (1989): 11-12.

⁴¹ Gordon M., interview. See also Paul C., HIV in My Day, interview by Benjamin Klassen, 6 November 2017; Nazim M., HIV in My Day, interview by Robert Ablenas, 16 October 2017; Robert A., interview.

community in the mid-1980s, providing an ethical alternative premised on mutual care to the sexual conservatism and abstinence promoted by mainstream institutions. As Paul, who worked as both a community caregiver and nurse in the AIDS ward at St. Paul's Hospital, discusses: "The consensus was that safer sex ... was the way to go ... You could get publicly or privately shamed ... if you weren't practising safe sex – this was something you were doing that was wrong ... Not only was it a health practice, it became an ethical and moral practice as well."⁴² As Paul implies, gay men were not always able to live up to this ethical ideal; indeed, several narrators described the challenges of consistently practising safe sex in the 1980s and the guilt and fear that accompanied any lapses.⁴³ Although not always consistently practised, safe-sex practices allowed for a reassertion of sexual liberation and a celebration of gay identity at a time when promiscuity and gayness were restigmatized, and this helped enable future activist responses to the epidemic through the fostering of sexually resistive community discourses.

While AIDS Vancouver did political work under an apolitical veneer, Vancouver's second major ASO, the Vancouver PWA Coalition, frequently blurred the line between the support-oriented services and overt political protest, particularly in its early years.⁴⁴ Like AIDS Vancouver, the coalition provided support to PWAs but initially positioned itself as a political alternative to AIDS Vancouver's apparent apoliticism after breaking off from the latter organization in 1986 to focus on meeting the immediate needs of the city's PWAs. As described by Warren Jensen, its initial spokesperson, the coalition's goals combined aspects of activism and care:

The coalition operates a support group for persons with AIDS ... where they can meet others like themselves in a relaxed and friendly environment. We host alternative therapy workshops for those who wish to explore options such as meditation, nutrition, holistic therapies, experimental drugs and stress reduction ... The coalition organizes political activities for those PWAs and their supporters who want to take action to press for a viral testing lab in Vancouver and for the release by Ottawa of promising experimental drugs.⁴⁵

⁴² Paul H., HIV in My Day, interview by Benjamin Klassen, 30 October 2017.

⁴³ Tony C., HIV in My Day, interview by Benjamin Klassen, 6 December 2017; Michael D., HIV in My Day, interview by Benjamin Klassen, 24 November 2017.

⁴⁴ The organization later changed its name to the Vancouver PWA Society, then to the British Columbian PWA Society, and finally, in 2011, to Positive Living BC. It closed in early 2020.

⁴⁵ Warren Jensen, "Always Here When You Need Us,' Dogwood Monarchists Tell PWAs," *Angles*, May 1986.

As its last goal makes clear, the PWA Coalition was not opposed to political mobilization. Members of the coalition began importing experimental treatments for personal use and travelled to Ottawa to present a petition to the federal government for the release of such treatments in June 1986.⁴⁶

Much of the coalition's activism was aimed at addressing local concerns. Foreshadowing the direct-action tactics of later groups, roughly a dozen members of the PWA Coalition picketed the provincial legislature in March 1986 to advocate for the opening of a viral testing lab in Vancouver in what Gary Kinsman describes as "the first ... AIDS activist action across the Canadian state."⁴⁷ These political tactics resulted in the building of a viral testing lab in Vancouver, announced in September 1986, and the gradual scale-up of access to AZT throughout 1987, including partial coverage of the treatment's cost.⁴⁸ Similar actions occurred in September 1989 – when the organization held a rally at Bill Vander Zalm's Christian theme park, Fantasy Gardens, to protest remarks made by two BC cabinet ministers that blamed people living with HIV for getting the virus – and in December 1989, when they held a rally at the Peace Arch in partnership with ACT UP Seattle to protest border restrictions for people living with AIDS.⁴⁹

Like AIDS Vancouver, once it secured government funding, the Vancouver PWA Coalition had to distance itself from positions critical of the government for fear of jeopardizing that funding, although it continued to advocate for the health of people living with HIV through more conventional political channels, such as lobbying.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the coalition's early activist period complicates narratives that imply a sharp

⁴⁶ "Ottawa Rules Drugs Worse Than AIDS," *Angles*, August 1986.

⁴⁷ John Kozachenko, AAHP, interview by Gary Kinsman and Alexis Shotwell (Vancouver), 29 October 2014.

⁴⁸ Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship*, 63; McCaskell, *Queer Progress*, 231; David Myers, "Viral Testing Lab Said to Be Imminent," *Angles*, May 1986; Rob Joyce, "Names for Hope: Public Pressures Government to Release Compassionate Drugs," *Angles*, June 1986; "Ottawa Rules Drugs Worse Than AIDS," *Angles*, August 1986; David Myers, "Gov't Okays Viral Lab Limits Promising Drug to 60," *Angles*, October 1986; Kozachenko, AAHP; Nancy Knickerbocker, "Second Group to Test Effects of AIDS Drug," *Vancouver Sun*, 3 January 1987, A6. Prior to the opening of the lab in Vancouver, facilities only existed in Montreal and Ottawa, which led to long wait times for results and made it difficult to conduct extensive clinical trials of experimental treatments locally.

⁴⁹ Paul C., interview; Dan Guinan, "Fantasy AIDS Rally," *Angles*, September 1989; "Briefly: AIDS Activists to Stage Rally at Peace Arch," *Vancouver Sun*, 29 November 1989, A14.

⁵⁰ Brown, 29, 51–52, 66, 70; Robert A., interview; Dan Gawthrop, "Social Democrats Take a Stand on Gay Rights – The NDP: Coming Out at Last?," *Angles*, May 1990. This transition was marked by a name change from "coalition" to "society," the latter having more organizational structure. Kozachenko, AAHP.

distinction between service-oriented and activist-oriented organizations, and it served as a model for later AIDS activism in the city. Additionally, the PWA Coalition continued to foreground treatment activism well into the 1990s by educating its members on various treatment options, running its own drug trials, and advocating for access to experimental treatments.⁵¹ Outlining the organization's perspective on treatment options in *Angles*, PWA spokesperson and former teacher Kevin Brown noted, "We're tired of this attitude that PWAs are already dead but they're just too stupid to lie down. We wanted to do something."⁵² Thus, the PWA Coalition took treatment issues into its own hands by establishing the Treatment Information Program, which provided the latest news on drug trials and promising treatments. Gordon, a founding member of the program, recalled that it included people who "knew more about [HIV] than the local so-called specialists," and that "it was kind of empowering, not just passively following the medical community but educating ourselves and empowering ourselves."⁵³ When the federal government refused to conduct clinical trials on experimental treatments, the PWA Coalition was happy to conduct its own.⁵⁴

Support groups within the organization could also become impromptu spaces of information sharing. Dakota, who moved from Ottawa to Vancouver in the mid-1980s after coming out, recalls: "the support group would be an outlet for people to vent, share, come up with their different things that they're trying. 'Oh, I've tried this. I've tried that. This is helping, that's helping.' So, you know, it was also ... information sharing."⁵⁵ Collectively, these actions allowed members within the PWA Coalition to assert agency over their own health and to politically mobilize against the slow response of the medical establishment.

In summary, in the early years of the epidemic, ASOs were already pursuing many of the goals that would later be championed by direct-action activists in Vancouver. They demanded greater government funding for HIV medications, the release of experimental treatments, and the promotion of safe-sex education. The PWA Coalition also modelled the direct-action tactics that would later be utilized by the CRHL and ACT UP Vancouver. While ACT UP articulated these goals in a particularly forceful manner, it built on the political foundation

⁵¹ "Answers, Please," *Angles*, April 1998.

⁵² David Myers, "PWA's Study Lecithin," *Angles*, January 1988.

⁵³ Gordon W., HIV in My Day, interview by Benjamin Klassen, 1 May 2018.

⁵⁴ Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship*, 102–103; "Vancouver PWAs Research New Drug," *Angles*, September 1987; Myers, "PWA's Study Lecithin."

⁵⁵ Dakota D., HIV in My Day, interview by Benjamin Klassen, 17 November 2017.

established by earlier ASOs. Thus, the boundary between direct-action activism and earlier community responses was porous.

Gay community responses to the epidemic in Vancouver shifted in the mid- to late 1980s as direct-action activism emerged across North America and local and provincial conditions evolved. Just when infection rates and deaths skyrocketed in British Columbia, Bill Vander Zalm became premier in 1986. A perceptible shift towards anger was occurring within the community in response to these developments and to the inaction and heightened homophobia of the provincial government. Paul, a self-described Marxist who was also involved in labour and anti-nuclear movements, suggests, “the community ... was getting out of the shock and ... finally becoming angry.”⁵⁶ This anger was palpable in an interview in the *Province* in January 1987 with Bob Tivey, who remarked that government’s inaction was “outrageous” and demonstrated that “a few people in high places still don’t think [AIDS is] a serious enough problem.” Five months later, when additional provincial funding for AIDS Vancouver was refused, Tivey remarked that this was due to the organization being perceived as “gay” and was indicative of the provincial government “treating us like second-class citizens.”⁵⁷ Existing channels of community mobilization, largely reliant on government funding, were not viewed as providing an adequate outlet for this growing anger. As Janis, who had previously been extensively involved in women’s organizing in Edmonton, recalls:

My understanding was that the PWA Society and ... AIDS Vancouver, were doing tremendous work in terms of supporting people who were HIV-positive and people with AIDS in advocating for them, in researching the treatment options, but they were also getting government funding to do so. There was a conscious decision that they could not engage in political activism or advocacy, and there were people within who wanted to have that avenue and who knew of ACT UP organizations in the States.⁵⁸

As anger about local conditions intensified and organizational alternatives came into focus in other cities, many within Vancouver’s gay community increasingly viewed confrontational activism as a necessity.

In 1987, the Social Credit government introduced Bill 34, which would enable it to quarantine any person suffering from a communicable

⁵⁶ Paul C., interview.

⁵⁷ Hauka, “AIDS Inertia Hit,”; Mullens and Baldrey, “AIDS Vancouver Denied BC Grant.”

⁵⁸ Janis Kaleta, AAHP, interview by Gary Kinsman and Alexis Shotwell (Vancouver), 29 October 2014.

disease who was “likely to, willfully, carelessly or because of mental incompetence, expose others to the disease.”⁵⁹ While the bill made no explicit mention of HIV/AIDS, it ignited this latent activist sentiment as the threat of quarantine presented, as Robert describes, “a rallying cry – a point for people to mobilize against.”⁶⁰ Many within Vancouver’s gay community believed that the bill would be used to quarantine gay men. In fact, as Paul recalls, such quarantine provisions already existed in British Columbia; thus, the bill was viewed as a means of fomenting homophobia, further stigmatizing marginalized populations, and propagating HIV hysteria:

There were already provisions in the Health Act for quarantining someone ... It was totally unnecessary and it was just sort of a way to get attention to stigmatize the community, because of course this would play to [the Social Credit] constituency – you know, the moral, social conservative, right-wing segment. And then they think, well, nobody’s gonna stand up for gay people, or, you know, people with AIDS, and sex workers, and IV drug users ... So, they figured, oh good, we can just do this here and make it look like we’re actually doing something when of course all we’re doing is fanning the fires of hatred without doing anything to stop the crisis from worsening.⁶¹

Writing in the *Vancouver PWA Coalition Newsletter*, Nicholas Gray, a local PWA, noted that, while the bill did not produce a radical legal change, a “glance at the current government’s record with AIDS related concerns does not make me feel secure. This little ‘re-wording’ of the Health Act may be where it starts, but where will it lead us?”⁶² Bill 34 epitomized the pre-existing apathy and homophobia of the provincial government, which spurred a more activist-oriented response.

⁵⁹ Government of British Columbia, *Health Act: Revised Statutes of BC, 1979*, c. 161, <http://www.bclaws.ca/civix/document/id/g2consol16/g2consol16/79161>. Existing provisions allowed for “the isolation or modified isolation ... of a person having a reportable communicable disease or the quarantine of a person who, while susceptible to a reportable communicable disease, has been exposed to it.” However, Bill 34 clarified and extended aspects of this existing legislation by defining what constituted a health hazard. See Keith Baldrey, “New Quarantine Power Called Frightening to AIDS Sufferers,” *Vancouver Sun*, 8 July 1987, A1.

⁶⁰ Robert A., interview.

⁶¹ Paul C., interview. Also discussed in Craik, AAHP; Banner, AAHP.

⁶² Nicholas Gray, “Quarantine! A Personal Reaction from Nicholas Gray,” *Vancouver PWA Coalition Newsletter*, issue 11, August 1987, 4. Bill 34 was also extensively discussed in *Angles*: see Dan Guinan, “Quarantine ... Really?,” *Angles*, August 1987; Dan Guinan, “BC Moves to Quarantine: ‘Willfully, Carelessly or Because of Mental Incompetence?’,” *Angles*, February 1988; Dan Guinan, “Rally to Stop AIDS Bill,” *Angles*, December 1987.

Vancouver's first direct-action AIDS activist organization, the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation (CRHL), formed in 1987 to address this threat. While the CRHL emerged during roughly the same period as other AIDS activist groups throughout the United States and Canada, it was a direct response to local conditions, specifically Bill 34. Unlike earlier ASOs in Vancouver, the CRHL was primarily committed to confronting the provincial government for its role in exacerbating the epidemic, and it did so through direct-action street activism to protest Bill 34.⁶³ Paul recalled: "we actually ended up having some demonstrations against this quarantine law ... which was amazing – getting people out into the streets actually protesting ... And in the meantime, we'd also gone to bars and had leafletted at bars."⁶⁴ At the first CRHL demonstration, in September 1987, approximately two hundred people marched with placards – reading "Stop the Quarantine Law" and "Education Not Incarceration" – and rallied on the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Speeches compared the proposed bill to Japanese Canadian internment, concentration camps, and the Holocaust; decried the homophobia of the provincial government; and proposed alternatives to quarantine, such as increased funding for local ASOs, promotion of safe sex, and provision of clean needles to IV drug users.⁶⁵ Speakers at the first protest included Bob Tivey, who had just been fired from his role at AIDS Vancouver, and Kevin Brown, founding member of the PWA Coalition; indeed, the coalition actively endorsed the CRHL.⁶⁶ The presence of prominent members from the Vancouver PWA Coalition and AIDS Vancouver further demonstrates the blurriness between ASOs and activism in Vancouver. Additional CRHL protests at the Grey Cup parade in November and at a Social Credit fundraiser in December drew large crowds.⁶⁷

While earlier ASOs were not exclusively composed of gay men, the CRHL brought together various communities through a shared political cause.⁶⁸ Since the bill had implications for the rights of sex workers – who were frequently portrayed as vectors of disease – many local feminists also mobilized against it, including the organization POWER (Prostitutes

⁶³ Craik, AAHP.

⁶⁴ Paul C., interview.

⁶⁵ Dan Guinan, "No to Quarantine' Says Health Coalition," *Angles*, October 1987.

⁶⁶ Guinan, "No to Quarantine"; Patti Flather, "AIDS Law Protesters Jeer Socred Fundraiser," *Vancouver Sun*, 3 December 1987, A14.

⁶⁷ Dan Guinan, "Rally to Stop AIDS Bill," *Angles*, December 1987; Richard Banner, "Quarantine? That's Not What Friends Are For," *Angles*, January 1988; Richard Banner, "Monumental Stupidity," *Angles*, January 1988; Flather.

⁶⁸ Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship*, 128–29.

and Other Women for Equal Rights).⁶⁹ Many lesbians, members of trade unions, and various public health professionals also joined the CRHL.⁷⁰ The range of groups involved in the CRHL is notable because, in the preceding years, these groups had generally been doing political work separately. As Paul notes: “It brought us together, a lot of coalescing, a lot of groups in the queer community who had been working separately before ... because I think they were realizing ... that this is sort of the thin edge of the wedge, you know ... We were all sort of in the cross hairs of the far right, so they knew that we all had to come together to fight.”⁷¹ Prior to this, even within the queer community, lesbians and gay men had often worked separately, as Richard recalls: “I remember that that was probably the first thing where we were working closely with a lot of women – lesbian – organizers. I think that brought together lesbians and gay men.”⁷² Thus, Bill 34 united many marginalized groups in opposition to the Social Credit Party’s threat of quarantine. Coalition-building and solidarity across these groups continued in later community responses to the epidemic, such as within ACT UP, and ultimately strengthened these forms of political mobilization.

Despite strong opposition, the legislature passed Bill 34 in January 1988. According to Vancouver’s chief medical officer, Dr. John Blatherwick, the bill could be used to quarantine gay men who were living with HIV and continued having sex, but it was never used for this purpose.⁷³ Indeed, the vocal and militant disapproval of those within the CRHL helped ensure that quarantine measures would not be used. Dan, who was a member of the gay socialist group Front for Active Gay Socialism (FAGS) along with Paul and Richard, suggests: “We [were] fighting back. So, it was part of that whole activism thing. ‘We’re fighting back. We care about ourselves. We’re standing up for ourselves. We are a community.’ Just those very broad messages were very important to get out.”⁷⁴ The CRHL provided an outlet for gay and other affected communities to stand up for themselves in the face of provincial right-wing backlash. While they

⁶⁹ Joan Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women: Sexuality, Family, and the Law in Ontario, 1920–1960*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 88–90, 103, 129; David Hugill, *Missing Women, Missing News: Covering Crisis in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2010), 56–57; Patton, *Last Served?*, 5–7, 11–12, 49.

⁷⁰ Guinan, “No to Quarantine”; Guinan, “BC Moves to Quarantine”; Kozachenko, AAHP; Craik, AAHP; Paul C., interview; “Untitled,” *Kinesis*, October 1987, 3; Baldrey, “New Quarantine.”

⁷¹ Paul C., interview. The Socreds also targeted women’s reproductive rights. See Brown, 46.

⁷² Banner, AAHP.

⁷³ Guinan, “BC Moves to Quarantine.”

⁷⁴ Dan Guinan, AAHP, interview by Gary Kinsman and Alexis Shotwell, 29 October 2014. Also discussed by Paul C., interview; Craik, AAHP.

failed to prevent the passage of Bill 34, the CRHL succeeded in mobilizing these communities and challenging the government's underlying homophobic ideology.

Following the passage of Bill 34, the CRHL disbanded since it had explicitly formed to protest its passage. Nonetheless, many of its main players became involved in ACT UP Vancouver when it formed in 1990. As Richard describes: "I think that after the bill passed, the CRHL just kind of faded away because it was so narrowly focused and the people in it were so diverse ... The more activist people who kind of met each other around the CRHL were the ones who then became involved in ACT UP."⁷⁵ As ACT UP drew the "more activist" individuals from the CRHL, many community members saw ACT UP as a more radical extension of the political approaches initially utilized by the Vancouver PWA Coalition and the CRHL. For example, Paul recalls: "ACT UP at this time was a lot more militant than the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation ... So, there was more militancy and more boldness on the part of people in the queer community around ACT UP."⁷⁶

ACT UP also built upon the CRHL's coalitional approach, drawing individuals from diverse communities and with differing political backgrounds to catalyze discussion about AIDS, cultivate resistance to the Social Credit government, and contribute to large provincial AIDS policy shifts. Like the CRHL, women – many with backgrounds in women's movements – were extensively involved in ACT UP. As Janis recalls: "There were also a lot of women – young women, young dykes – involved in the prison justice movement, radical dykes who immediately would see the appeal of something like this. There were Downtown Eastside people, I say in the sense of, you know, non-middle class, white gay men living with AIDS."⁷⁷ While gay men dominated ACT UP, they were not the only voices present within it: the organization also included Indigenous members and many PWAs, including some who were active with the PWA Society.⁷⁸ Indeed, ACT UP's leaflets explicitly declared: "ACT UP is an inclusive organization. People who participate in ACT UP are from diverse communities. We welcome anyone and everyone willing to join us in the AIDS struggle."⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Banner, AAHP. Also discussed in Kozachenko, AAHP.

⁷⁶ Craik, AAHP.

⁷⁷ Kaleta, AAHP. Other ACT UP members brought political backgrounds in the anti-nuclear movement, socialism, and earlier queer movements. Craik, AAHP; Kozachenko, AAHP.

⁷⁸ Robert A., interview; Paul C., interview; Kozachenko, AAHP.

⁷⁹ ACT UP Vancouver, "Untitled Leaflet [i]."

In comparison to those of the CRHL, ACT UP's goals were simultaneously narrower (focusing predominately on issues related to HIV) and broader (in terms of critiquing Social Credit policy as a whole rather than as a single piece of legislation). As the number of AIDS cases in the province peaked in the early 1990s, the continued inaction of the government again warranted a confrontational political response.⁸⁰ Regarding the organization's broad objectives, John, a prominent local activist who had Bill Vander Zalm's wife, Lillian, trip over him during an ACT UP demonstration during a Social Credit fundraiser, outlines: "We were involved in other actions other than just AIDS-related, but it was primarily about HIV and responding to the provincial government."⁸¹ This emphasis on HIV-related issues was reflected in the organization's specific goals, as Paul suggests: "We had a lot of demands ... Things like safer sex education, and gay rights, and, you know, condoms in the prisons, and teaching prisoners how to clean ... their rigs and stuff like that."⁸² While the Social Credit government continued to blame gay men and other marginalized populations for the spread of HIV, with party members referring to AIDS as a self-inflicted wound and as a result of gay "lifestyles,"⁸³ ACT UP articulated alternative, concrete approaches to dealing with the provincial epidemic. Like direct-action AIDS activists elsewhere, ACT UP's critiques also went beyond HIV-specific issues to emphasize the social underpinnings of health disparities. Counter to the government's strategy to blame the victim, ACT UP Vancouver argued that homophobia, misogyny, racism, colonization, and poverty needed to be challenged to combat the epidemic, and it foregrounded these systemic issues in its protests and flyers.⁸⁴

While its goals were aimed at local targets, ACT UP Vancouver's political methods and structure were inspired by AIDS activist organizations elsewhere in the United States and Canada, and their use of sensational direct-action tactics and a "by whatever means necessary" approach ... to the fight against AIDS.⁸⁵ Their demonstrations were

⁸⁰ Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship*, 43; BC Centre for Disease Control, *HIV Annual Report, 2014* (Vancouver: BCCDC, 2015), 29.

⁸¹ Kozachenko, AAHP.

⁸² Paul C., interview; ACT UP Vancouver, "Untitled Leaflet [2]," 1990; ACT UP Vancouver, "World AIDS Day - Target: Victoria," 1990; ACT UP Vancouver, "Peanuts from Perrin: What AIDS Strategy?," 1991.

⁸³ David Rayside and Evert Lindquist, "Canada: Community Activism, Federalism, and the New Politics of Disease," in *AIDS in the Industrialized Democracies: Passions, Politics, and Policies*, ed. D.L. Kirp and R. Bayer (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 49-98.

⁸⁴ ACT UP Vancouver, "We Are Not Silent."

⁸⁵ Tom Patterson, "ACT UP Starts Up," *Angles*, August 1990.

designed to disrupt public space and garner attention for ACT UP's messages through die-ins, marches, and provocative artistic imagery, such as red paint or ketchup to symbolize the blood of PWAs due to the provincial government's homophobia and indifference (see Figure 2). ACT UP produced leaflets containing provocative imagery inspired by ACT UP New York's art collective Gran Fury as another means of disseminating its messages and critiques of the Social Credit government.⁸⁶ Structurally, the organization built on the activist tradition of the civil rights and women's movements in using affinity groups, which broke up the organization into small subgroups to enhance intimacy and support, provide safety during civil disobedience actions, and offer a safety valve for those members who wished to engage in protest on a particular issue. This meant that demonstrations ranged in scale, with some involving the majority of the organization's members and other community members, and others involving a single affinity group of fewer than ten people.⁸⁷ In the year after its first meeting in July 1990, ACT UP Vancouver was prolific, holding nearly a dozen demonstrations against the Social Credit government.⁸⁸ After an initial wave of larger demonstrations, however, such protests typically drew a small core group of about a dozen activists, many of whom were also involved in *Angles* and other forms of queer activism.⁸⁹

Despite this period of intense activity, ACT UP Vancouver became inactive following the election of a left-wing New Democratic Party (NDP) government in October 1991 that was much more supportive of gay and lesbian issues than had been the Social Credit Party.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ ACT UP Vancouver, "Did You Know That ..."; ACT UP Vancouver, "Unnamed Leaflet [2]"; Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship*, 62–63; Gould, *Moving Politics*, 239–40; Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 174–75; Douglas Crimp, "Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," in Crimp, 38–49; ACT UP Vancouver, "He Kills Me"; ACT UP Vancouver, "Educating Rita: Social Credit AIDS Policy Is a Disgrace," 1991.

⁸⁷ *United in Anger*; Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA*, 15–16. The largest of these demonstrations at Robson Square, on 1 August 1990, involved about 75 to 150 people. See Brown, *RePlacing Citizenship*, 65; Paul Dayson, "ACT-UP Protests Gov't Inaction," *Ubysses*, 2 August 1990; Paul C., interview.

⁸⁸ Paul C., interview; Craik, AAHP; Kozachenko, AAHP; Brown, 65–70; Lyn Cockburn, "Acting Up Out of Sheer Frustration," *Province*, 16 September 1990, 35; Paul Craik, "ACT UP Strikes Again: Let the Fags Die ..." *Angles*, January 1991; Paul Dayson, "AIDS Activists Protest Premier: BC's Health Care Policies Are Targeted in an Angry Demonstration," *Ubysses*, 1 February 1991; Lloyd Nicholson, "Ten Year Itch: Still No Action After Living with AIDS for a Decade," *Angles*, May 1991; "Sacred Convention Delegates Pursued by Protesters," *West Ender*, 25 July 1991, 2; "Militant AIDS Group Will Use Civil Disobedience," *Vancouver Sun*, 23 July 1990, B2..

⁸⁹ Paul C., interview; Guinan, AAHP; Kaleta, AAHP; Kozachenko, AAHP.

⁹⁰ In contrast, AIDS Action Now! in Toronto is still active. Emerging out of the socialist Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1961, the NDP had long been the dominant left-wing party on both provincial and federal levels. Over time, the party moved closer to the

Additionally, ACT UP's militant tactics alienated many of its potential allies who were also organizing against the Social Credit government, prompting criticism from other local ASOs and within *Angles*. Writing about an ACT UP action to "heckle" the federal minister of health at the provincial conference on AIDS in April 1991, Lloyd Nicholson argued: "In the end ACT UP shot itself in the foot. Their strategy to heckle the minister throughout his speech did not win over the unconverted."⁹¹ Some ACT UP members faced potential jail time if they continued to engage in civil disobedience, having used up their "get out of jail free cards" during previous arrests. Especially for members who were living with HIV, health issues and burnout contributed to ACT UP's short existence.⁹² Most important, the election of an NDP government eliminated ACT UP's primary target, the Social Credit Party, and as local political conditions improved, the need for ACT UP's activism declined. With a more liberal and responsive government in power, many members felt that more could be achieved through legislative means than through direct-action activism.⁹³

Despite ACT UP's brief existence and narrow focus, it played a crucial role in drawing attention to AIDS-related issues and fostering a culture of resistance within Vancouver's gay community. ACT UP's theatrical demonstrations were covered extensively by local queer, feminist, student, mainstream, and right-wing media alike, with widely diverging levels of support and criticism expressed, sometimes within the same periodicals.⁹⁴ Thus, ACT UP was successful in drawing attention to HIV in Vancouver, as Robert, who was involved in developing one of AIDS Vancouver's later safe-sex campaigns, notes: "The logic of engaging in some of this in-your-face stuff is to just get media attention ... get conversation

centre of the political spectrum and embraced a more liberal stance on gay issues, beginning in the early 1980s. Barman, *The West beyond the West*, 345–46, 355–56; Hak, *The Left in British Columbia*, 2, 64–65, 81–82, 119–21, 140, 163, 170–71; Fred Gilbertson, "Increased Effort to Win Gay Vote: NDP Party Supports Rights for Gays," *Angles*, September 1984.

⁹¹ Nicholson, "Ten Year Itch."

⁹² Paul C., interview; Craik, AAHP.

⁹³ Robert A., interview; Kaleta, AAHP; Banner, AAHP.

⁹⁴ ACT UP was covered extensively in *Angles*. See, for example, Patterson, "ACT UP Starts Up"; Allen Braude, "Acting Up against Government Inaction," *Angles*, April 1991; Nicholson. Mainstream coverage included positive portrayals (e.g., Cockburn, "Acting Up Out of Sheer Frustration"), negative portrayals (e.g., Harold Munro, "Rubber-Gloved Police Cart Away Protester," *Vancouver Sun*, 20 July 1991, A9), and neutral or mixed portrayals (e.g., Don Hauka and Barbara McLintock, "AIDS Activists Jeer, Chant at 'Sacred Bigots,'" *Province*, 12 October 1990, 6). Feminist and university coverage included Christine Cumming, "ACT UP: United in Hope and Anger," *Kinesis*, November 1990; and Dayson, "ACT-UP Protests Gov't Inaction." Right-wing coverage included Tom McFeely, "A Mob Most Vile: As Gays Assault the Vander Zalm, Stats Foil Their Case," *British Columbia Report*, 10 September 1990, 19.

started even if people are referring to those assholes or shit-disturbers.”⁹⁵ In garnering extensive media attention and catalyzing discussions about the epidemic and its local impacts, ACT UP’s provocative tactics were successful. Additionally, ACT UP provided a call to mobilize and resist within Vancouver’s gay community that had a more diffuse impact and helped to cultivate pride and resistance, which impelled further political mobilization and strengthened a sense of solidarity. As Paul outlines, “ACT UP ... was probably successful in mobilizing the community, of creating a culture of resistance ... It raised our own self-confidence as a community ... [It taught] us if you struggle, you can win.”⁹⁶ ACT UP thus helped to counter homophobic and moralistic mainstream discourses with positive and empowering narratives of gay agency and resistance.⁹⁷ Alongside the caregiving, safe sex, and covert political efforts of local ASOs, ACT UP thus contributed to cultivating community solidarity.

Additionally, while ACT UP was not solely responsible for catalyzing shifts in provincial AIDS policies, its focus on the homophobic, moralistic policies of the Social Credit Party was effective as the new government quickly changed many of these policies.⁹⁸ Many of ACT UP’s specific goals – including safe-sex education, funding for experimental treatments, and the addition of anti-discrimination protection for gays and lesbians in the provincial Human Rights Code – were explicitly built into the provincial NDP’s campaign promises in the 1991 election and were implemented following its election victory.⁹⁹ Clearly, ACT UP cannot be given all of the credit for these policy shifts as other ASOs were advocating for many of the same goals through other tactics. For instance, the Vancouver PWA Society critically shaped the NDP’s election platform through lobbying and extensive conversations with party officials, and its demands bore a striking resemblance to those made by ACT UP.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, AIDS Vancouver had been advocating for safe-sex education in schools since the mid-1980s.¹⁰¹ Still, the fact that this shift in provincial HIV politics occurred immediately following ACT UP’s brief, prolific period was not mere coincidence since many of

⁹⁵ Robert A., interview.

⁹⁶ Paul C., interview.

⁹⁷ Paul C., interview; Robert A., interview.

⁹⁸ Paul C., interview.

⁹⁹ These promises were explicitly made in the NDP’s pre-election promotional material (corresponding to promises 39, 44, and 45). See New Democratic Party of British Columbia, “A Better Way for British Columbia: New Democrat Election Platform” (Burnaby, BC: British Columbia New Democrats, 1991); Paul C., interview.

¹⁰⁰ Gawthrop, “Social Democrats Take a Stand on Gay Rights,” *Angles*, May 1990.

¹⁰¹ David Myers, “Condoms Poked,” *Angles*, February 1987; Mike Harcourt, “Letters: Harcourt on Dueck,” *Angles*, October 1989.

these goals had been championed by other local ASOs since the mid-1980s with minimal success. ACT UP's direct-action tactics allowed the organization to "force the issue" and to ensure that these promises were made explicit and kept by the NDP government.¹⁰²

Ultimately, political change around HIV-related issues in Vancouver was the result of multiple organizations using differing tactics to catalyze change. While AIDS Vancouver and the PWA Coalition took up essential AIDS service provision, support, and education work, ACT UP played a complementary role as the sole local organization to consistently employ direct-action tactics during this time. For example, John recalls: "I heard a remark made from the PWA Coalition that was like, 'Either you can talk to us and deal with us, or there's this other organization out there. We will do things legally, but you might have this activist response.'"¹⁰³ Thus, ASOs could wield ACT UP as a threat to exert pressure on the government for improved HIV policies. While organizations and community members frequently disagreed on "proper" or "effective" political tactics, utilizing these tactics in tandem sped up the rate of political change in Vancouver, as Richard notes: "Some people ... thought that [lobbying for funding] was a more productive way of spending their time than being out organizing on the street ... I think we supported each other and created a political milieu in which more could happen. I think either one of them without the other probably would have accomplished less."¹⁰⁴ ACT UP's militant tactics were thus complementary to the lobbying efforts of allegedly apolitical ASOs, allowing for pressure to be exerted on the government through multiple channels.

While organizational developments in Vancouver followed a similar trajectory to those elsewhere in the United States and Canada, and were undoubtedly influenced by national and international dynamics, AIDS activist and service organizations alike were principally responding to immediate local issues and political needs. This local focus was a large part of what made these organizations successful. The safe-sex education efforts of AIDS Vancouver, for example, addressed the immediate needs of the city's gay community by providing information within a sexually liberating framework to the anxious and immobilized, thus helping to reaffirm gay identities, establish community networks, and mobilize

¹⁰² Richard Banner and David Jacobs, "Expectations High But Will an NDP Government Deliver?," *Angles*, November 1991; Richard Banner, "NDP Government Makes Good on an Old Promise, Offers Protection from Discrimination to Lesbians and Gay Men: The Rights Step," *Angles*, July 1992; Hak, *The Left in British Columbia*, 2.

¹⁰³ Kozachenko, AAHP.

¹⁰⁴ Banner, AAHP.

the city's gay men in response to the crisis. In turn, the PWA Coalition met the immediate needs of Vancouver's growing number of PWAs by advocating for improved access to treatment and support. Building on this existing political foundation, the CRHL was a direct response to the intensifying homophobia of the provincial government and the threat of quarantine. Similarly, ACT UP emerged in response to the heightened antipathy of the Social Credit government as rates of AIDS continued to skyrocket in British Columbia. When these local conditions again shifted with the election of a provincial NDP government in 1991 and a decline in new HIV incidences around the same time, ACT UP Vancouver's presence declined.¹⁰⁵

Building on Patton and Rayside and Lindquist, I also argue that the range of organizational responses to the epidemic in Vancouver must be seen as integrated and related rather than as separate, and that this interconnectedness is a critical component of the story of community mobilization in response to Vancouver's HIV epidemic.¹⁰⁶ While the CRHL and ACT UP Vancouver presented a tactical departure from earlier forms of community organizing, the line dividing AIDS activist organizations from earlier ASOs in Vancouver was porous. Despite their apolitical façade, ASOs also generated essential political responses to the epidemic by promoting sexual liberation through safe sex and fiercely advocating for improved treatments for PWAs, and they occasionally utilized direct-action tactics themselves. Thus, AIDS activist organizations in Vancouver did not achieve their goals in isolation from ASOs, who provided a foundation for additional community mobilization. Collectively, these organizations fought for many of the same goals pertaining to gay rights, sexual liberation, access to treatments, and more extensive governmental responses to the epidemic, and their differing yet complementary political tactics produced profound shifts in provincial HIV policies. Historians must account for local permutations of AIDS activism that make space for this longer, complex trajectory of gay community organizing within narratives of HIV/AIDS to capture the nuances of how gay communities responded to, mobilized against, and ultimately survived the epidemic.

¹⁰⁵ [www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Statistics and Research/Statistics and Reports/STI/HIV_Annual_Report_2017_FINAL.pdf](http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Statistics%20and%20Research/Statistics%20and%20Reports/STI/HIV_Annual_Report_2017_FINAL.pdf)

¹⁰⁶ Patton, *Globalizing AIDS*, 3–4; Rayside and Lindquist, "AIDS Activism," 38, 40, 64.