



Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention
Deputation to the Executive Committee of the City of Toronto

July 28, 2011

Dear Councillors,

My name is Haran Vijayanathan and I am speaking here on behalf of the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP) with my fellow volunteer Shazia Islam. Both Shazia and I have been involved with ASAAP for many years; we avail of services the agency offers and also volunteer our time and expertise to contribute to the impact ASAAP has on the large South Asian population in the City of Toronto.

Our comments here today are in response to recommendations in the KPMG report to defund the Community Partnership and Investment Program and specifically the AIDS Prevention and Community Investment Program as outlined on pages 70 and 71 of the report.

On page 70 the report states *“These services could be reduced or eliminated although potentially impacting vulnerable individuals”*. We are here today to say that the impact to vulnerable individuals is not potential but very real.

The AIDS Prevention and Community Investment Program supports two very important projects at ASAAP that promote safer sex and HIV Prevention to Toronto’s large South Asian population. Our projects impact South Asian women, youth and gay and bisexual men and cater to issues of sexual health, HIV and sexuality- topics that are highly stigmatized in our communities.

The City funds us to run support groups, facilitate workshops and outreach to South Asians with a message that keeps people safe and healthy.

- In the 2010-2011 program year ASAAP’s city funded projects reached over 6225 South Asians in Toronto.
- This means that 6225 individuals in Toronto received culturally appropriate information about safer sex and health promotion either in their language, through a translated brochure, or by talking to someone they could relate to.

The AIDS Prevention and Community Investment Program makes this work possible. You may think that it’s simple to protect oneself from HIV as long as you know the risks. This is not so. HIV is complex and heightened by gender inequities, violence, stigma, self-esteem and much more. ASAAP effectively works within a culturally appropriate framework and has unique inroads with communities that allow us to make a difference.

Culturally appropriate services translate into campaigns within a context that people can relate to and multilingual service providers who understand where clients come from. The City of Toronto is a leader in recognizing that unique populations need unique services. Cutting these programs is a regressive move that would leave people underserved and unsupported.

In the long run this means added demands on health care. Each HIV infection is estimated to cost over \$750,000 over a lifetime with the direct and indirect costs of care and treatment. Prevention efforts are vital in the long-term.



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As a non-profit organization we harness the efforts of committed volunteers, are cost-effective with our work and essentially do more with less. The funding that we receive is an investment in the health of Toronto residents, not inconsequential fat.

I would like to share with you my story of how ASAAP's services have impacted my personal and professional life.

I arrived in Toronto from Winnipeg on December.2.2000. Why? Toronto is more diverse than the rest of Canada and it also has the largest population of Tamil Canadians. I found that comfort, and I also found comfort in knowing that I was not the only gay Tamil/South Asian guy - something I was well aware of as I grew up in Winnipeg.

I felt isolated as I did not identify with the main stream culture and they did not understand where I was coming from with my culture and background. I suffered in isolation and went through cycles of depression as a result of the isolation.

Attending the Snehithan and Dosti groups held at the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention, opened many doors for me personally and within a short period of time, professionally. Both Dosti and Snehithan are support groups for South Asian and Tamil gay and bisexual men. I was able to connect with other gay men from my culture and we were able to build community and support over the common problems we suffered with including reducing sexual risk taking.

I was able to break out of the depression and actively search for employment and contribute to my community with confidence. Funding cuts to programs like this will continue to place a stronger burden on the health care and social service systems as people suffering from isolation and or depression will not be able to come out of it as a result of lack of support and community building that improves an individual's self-esteem and resiliency.

In closing, I would like to share a letter written by Shazia.

"My name is Shazia Islam. I am a volunteer at the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention and I am here to express my support for continued funding of ASAAP's AIDS prevention services through the AIDS Prevention Community Investment Programs.

I have been a volunteer at ASAAP for over 2 years and have witnessed, in particular, the benefits of the organization's programs and services on South Asian communities and people living with HIV/AIDS.

HIV stigma is a pervasive antithesis to prevention awareness and education in South Asian communities. People living with HIV and AIDS comprise one of the most vulnerable groups in society because of social isolation, intimidation and violence, barriers to employment, safe housing, access to holistic healthcare and more. Prevention efforts are vital to combating HIV infection rates in the City and to ensure that people stay safe. Dedicated AIDS service organizations like ASAAP also provide opportunities for people living with HIV/AIDS to be a part of prevention work.



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The services that ASAAP offers to South Asians are absolutely essential to their health and well-being and to the overall development of healthy, empowered, and sustainable communities in this great city.

Thank you for your attention and consideration in this very important matter.”