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TIME FOR CANADA TO “GROW UP” ABOUT DRUGS ***Researchers, lawyers and activists will tell over-capacity symposium audience what’s needed in Canadian drug policy***

TORONTO, June 12, 2009 — Canada’s leading advocacy organization on HIV-related legal issues is calling on the federal government to commit to national policies on drugs that are based on evidence, a key theme to be addressed by a panel of experts this Saturday at a national symposium in Toronto.

“It’s high time for Canada to grow up regarding its approach to drugs,” says Richard Elliott, Executive Director of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. “There is so much evidence about what works to make people and communities safer, including protecting public health by preventing the spread of HIV linked to risky drug use. Yet on so many fronts, the government ignores or denies the evidence, and instead wastes huge sums of money on approaches that have been discredited. Tragically, these misguided efforts contribute to disease and distress.”

Mr. Elliott points out a number of ways in which Canada’s government is missing the mark, such as: pushing Bill C-15 through Parliament to impose mandatory minimum sentences that have proven disastrous in the U.S.; opposing successful, community-run supervised injection sites, even spending money to fight them in the courts; and refusing to implement proven harm-reduction approaches in prisons.

These and other issues will be scrutinized by experts at this Saturday’s event. Among the speakers are Dean Wilson and Shelly Tomic, plaintiffs in the court case aimed at keeping Vancouver’s supervised injection site (Insite) open. Wilson, the past president of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), and the story of the struggle for Insite were profiled in the documentary *Fix: The Story of an Addicted City*. Professor Carol Strike, a leading public health researcher from the University of Toronto, will examine the state of the research about effective HIV prevention and health promotion for people who use drugs, and Elliott will provide an analysis of the legal arguments in the Insite case.

Dealing with addictions in prisons is another major topic at the Symposium. Long-time prisoners’ rights activists James Motherall and Greg Simmons will share their personal perspectives based on their own years spent in prison. Expert Ralf Jürgens, who recently completed a comprehensive review of effective HIV prevention programs in prisons

published by the World Health Organization, will give an overview of the evidence for action. Lawyer Sandra Chu will explore the legal arguments in favour of introducing needle exchange programs in Canada's federal prisons, while advocate Giselle Dias will outline what else is needed. The issue of prison-based needle exchanges has recently been raised at the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security as it studies how the Correctional Service of Canada is addressing mental health and addictions in federal penitentiaries.

The Symposium will close with an address by Senator Pierre Nolin, who in 2002 chaired the Senate Special Committee on Illegal Drugs, which recommended decriminalizing marijuana in Canada. Senator Nolin will offer some observations about Canada's drug laws.

Drugs and prisons are only two of the controversial issues being discussed at this weekend's Symposium. Other sessions will address:

- *The criminalization of people who have exposed others to HIV:* As criminal charges mount in the courts, this will be the focus of a public lecture by Justice Edwin Cameron of South Africa's Constitutional Court (on Friday evening, June 12th) and a panel on Saturday (June 13th) titled "Challenging criminal charges for HIV transmission and exposure." Chaired by Justice Cameron, who is the only openly HIV-positive public official in all of Africa, the panel includes leading criminal defense lawyers Marlys Edwardh and Lucie Joncas, advocate Michaela Clayton from Namibia and Angel Parks from the AIDS Committee of Toronto, as well as Professor Barry Adam from the University of Windsor, who is leading the first Canadian study on the impact of these criminal prosecutions.
- *Canada's law on global access to affordable medicines:* As Parliament debates streamlining "Canada's Access to Medicines Regime" (Bill C-393 in the House of Commons and Bill S-232 in the Senate), experts will weigh in on these proposals to get life-saving medicines to people in developing nations. Lawyer Tenu Avafia from the UN Development Program will outline the parameters of the global debate, while the following panelists flesh out the issues at stake in reforming Canada's legislation: Dr. Philip Berger (Chief, Department of Family and Community Medicine at St. Michael's Hospital will discuss his experience in the field in Lesotho); Bruce Clark (VP of Regulatory Affairs at Apotex, Canada's largest generic drug manufacturer, the only company to export lower-cost medicines under Canada's law); Professor Jillian Clare Kohler (University of Toronto Faculty of Pharmacy); and Cailin Morrison (legal advisor on trade and intellectual property law who has worked extensively with developing countries).

Some 200 researchers, policy-makers, lawyers, activists and community organizations will be attending the 1st Annual Symposium on HIV, Law and Human Rights hosted by the Legal Network.

About the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and this Symposium

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. In response to the need for more information and debate, the Legal Network launched an annual forum for policy-makers, legal professionals, health researchers, activists, and people living with or vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. The day-long event features panel discussions and training workshops on advancing Canadian law and policy, based on scientific evidence and human rights principles (www.aidslaw.ca/symposium).

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Details:

Saturday, June 13, 2009 — 9:00 a.m. to 5:15 p.m.

Courtyard by Marriott Hotel

475 Yonge St. (between Wood St. and Alexander St.), Toronto

Full schedule and list of presenters: www.aidslaw.ca/symposium

For further information, including detailed biographies and interviews:

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