

Youth workers take to the street

ALLISON LAMPERT

«YOU probably need the large ones,» quipped Laval street worker Denis Larue Fréchette, white holding up a strip of condoms.

«yeah,» laughed the 21-year-old, as he took the condoms with one hand and cradled a joint in the other. He then paused, reflected and quietly asked for the regular-sized packets, white passing the marijuana butt around the group of four.

It's the first time Larue Fréchette and his partner, André Giroux, have come across these teens, who hang out from time to time at Chopin Park in Chomedey. The park is just one of the places the two frequent as part of a new effort this summer by community group Sida-Vie Laval to prevent the spread of HIV – the virus linked to AIDS – and to reach out to troubled youth.

Tomorrow and Saturday night, the non-profit organization, along with three other groups, will hand out condoms and questionnaires to party-goers at the Fuzzy Pub, a Laval dance club.

Besides prevention, Sida-Vie Laval is doing research – trying to find new youth hangouts, while seeking out teenagers and other people who need condoms, syringes or just someone to talk to. When visiting parks, the group works with Oasis, a 3-year-old Laval organization that travels around the city, distributing condoms and clean syringes from a trailer.

But unlike the Oasis staff, who wait for people to stop by the bulky, Pastel coloured vehicle, Giroux and Larue Fréchette seek out their clientele. With Giroux on a bicycle and Larue Fréchette on in-line skates, the pair comb through different Laval parks, shopping-centre parking lots and housing projects.

Part of the challenge is reaching out to IV-drug users, who usually hide their habit, Oasis director Cyndia Brunet said. Brunet, who rides in the Oasis trailer three times a week, from 6:30 to 11 pm., said she hasn't found any statistics that show how many people consume heroin or inject steroids in Laval.

Even without statistics, Brunet feels all types of drug consumption is higher in Laval than it appears.

«It's very hidden here in comparison with downtown Montreal,» Brunet said. «But we're so close, it's inevitable that the drugs come here.»