

Halton has few resources for AIDS victims: conference

By Howard Mozel
SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

Perhaps nothing underscored the importance of the one-day 'The New Faces of AIDS' conference last week more than the fact that three guest speakers from outside Halton were invited to avoid any potential for reprisals against individuals who live in the region.

Marcus Logan, chair of AIDS Action Halton, didn't make a major issue of it, but did say this was done to protect the speakers just in case, since all three either have, or are dealing directly with, the disease.

With this in mind, it's not surprising that invited guests and participants alike said again and again that what's needed most in even a well-educated community like Halton is awareness and compassion in order to mitigate the widespread stigma and discrimination found in the community.

A cure and/or vaccine would be fantastic too, of course, but attendees made it clear that in the meantime the kind of climate that breeds everything from paranoia to violence must be changed.

In fact, when asked flat-out what Halton's priorities should be, Toronto's Jennifer Newman — the only member of a family of five not infected — said public education, especially for youth, should top the list. If more people simply knew how HIV is and isn't spread, much discrimination and fear would subside.

She's not exactly sure how to change people's attitudes, however, but Newman said everyone has to just "keep pounding away."

The New Faces of AIDS was attended by youth, community groups and representatives from probation and correctional facilities. In addition to the panel discussion on which Newman spoke, the afternoon saw attendees participate in interactive workshops about HIV/AIDS in prisons and about harm reduction.

In Halton, there are 94 reported cases of AIDS and 164 individuals diagnosed with HIV.

Yet, despite the rate at which HIV is spread and the social implications of the virus, says The AIDS Network, Halton has little resources for addressing the issues associated with HIV/AIDS and none which deal solely with the issue. (One issue raised is that the region has no AIDS-specific clinic.)

Community consultation efforts also found that Halton has a number of specific barriers to resources and support for those affected by HIV/AIDS.

In addition to low general awareness, there's also a lack of community agency awareness of the role of public health's ability to provide HIV/AIDS education. There's also a lack of HIV-specific training relating to sexual orientation, particularly to enhance mental health services, and not enough doctors to manage the care of those with HIV/AIDS.

"I have heard people in Halton say that HIV/AIDS is not an issue here and that it's a big city issue, but Halton is ranked 15th out of 37 public health units in Ontario for the prevalence of HIV/AIDS infections," said Logan.

"That says to me that HIV/AIDS is an issue in Halton and we need to deal with it right now. We also need to recognize that Halton needs to strengthen the services that they provide to those living with HIV/AIDS."

and their families — agreed that HIV/AIDS remains a "hidden problem in Halton."

"The Miriam Group just had two new families referred to us last week and it's horrendous that people living in Halton have to go to Toronto or

Hamilton for treatment," she said.

Just as its title suggests, the conference did a remarkable job of painting a picture of the disease beyond mere statistics and reinforced the need for services and compassion through first-hand

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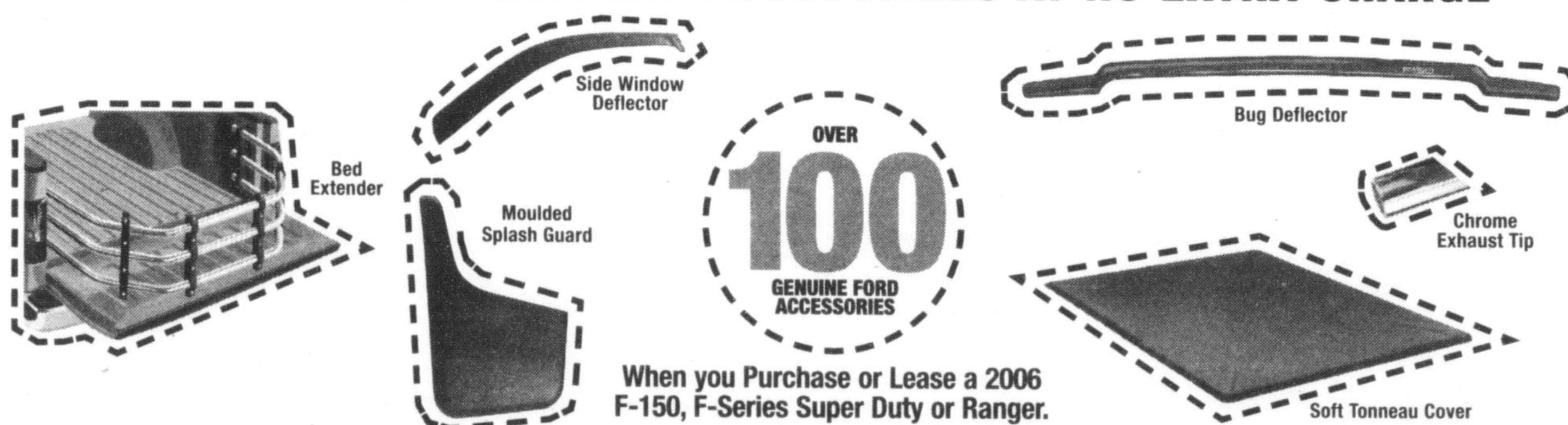
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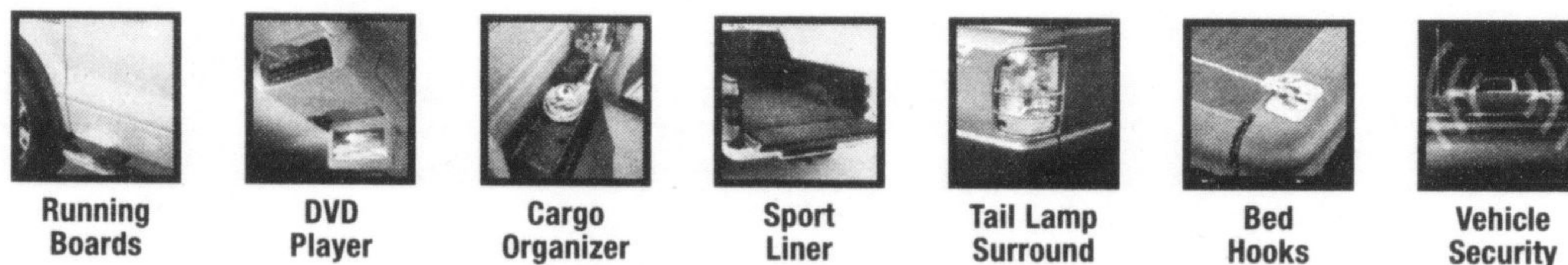
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