

AIDS Link

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Is there anybody there?

AIDS is having a devastating effect on children around the world, on a scale that has never been seen before. The lives of 80 infants will be lost due to AIDS over the next hour, 1,900 will die during the course of today, 13,000 this week, and 700,000 over this year.

A strategic decision has been made to focus Belize's limited resources for HIV/AIDS on prevention activities, and the care and treatment of people living with HIV/AIDS. This is all well and good, but delve a little deeper and something worrying emerges.

The Ministry of Health has stated that it has no resources to provide support services to orphans and vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS. The Department of Human Services exists to provide help to all those who are in need, but is limited by the scarcity of human and financial resources available to them. This passes the responsibility for the welfare of many of the estimated 14,000 children who are orphaned or vulnerable due to HIV/AIDS onto non-governmental organizations. But are these organizations equipped for the role? What help is there for these children?

We also need to ask if orphans and vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS should be singled out from amongst all children who are orphaned or vulnerable due to other causes. Is this itself not discrimination? Two out of every five children in Belize live below the poverty line, with their basic food and

non-food needs unmet. There is clearly a need for a much stronger response to this unacceptable situation so that all vulnerable children, regardless of the cause of their vulnerability, can be enabled to live healthy and happy lives, and to reach their full potential.



And so let us listen to the children and their families. Let us reassure them that there are people out there who care, that we will speak out to fight for a national level response, and until that is delivered we will do all we can to care for them within our communities.

Life with HIV/AIDS

I care. Do you?

This story reflects one of many Belizean situations which makes us realize much more needs to be done to protect the rights of children affected by HIV/AIDS:

"A young lady of about 22 years old had two children, a seven year old girl and a five year old boy. When her family found out she had HIV/AIDS, they were thrown out of the house. They went to live in an unfinished concrete house that had hardly any windows or doors. The mother had full-blown AIDS by then. All she had to eat

Continued on Page 12

Contents

- 2 Discussion Topic - Effects of HIV/AIDS on children
- 4 Living With HIV/AIDS - Concerns for children
- 6 Who's Who - UNICEF
- 7 Children's Activities
- 8 Nationwide News
- 9 Belize City and Cayo News
- 10 Stann Creek and Corozal News
- 11 Toledo and Orange Walk News
- 12 Poetry Contest, AIDS Link Evaluation

Issue 3

Discussion Topic**What experiences have you had or encountered of children affected by HIV/AIDS?**

There is still so much stigma and discrimination towards people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in Belize, as in many other countries, that the experiences of families affected by the disease are often kept as secret and hidden as possible. Here we have provided an opportunity for people affected by HIV/AIDS and those who work to help them to share their stories.

Stories from people with HIV/AIDS

“My husband and me and our second daughter have HIV and my husband is showing symptoms of AIDS. Only my family knows about our sickness and they support me fully. Our children have no idea we are sick. The one that is infected thinks she has cancer. The psychiatrist told her that she is infected but I told her ‘no’. If she knew she’d be frightened. It’s either me or my husband sick, so we can’t work at times and then we are left depending on people for help. We try our best to keep that from happening. The most difficult

thing is knowing my daughter is infected and at times my husband and I feel like we won’t be able to see them grow up. But our children must see us strong and know that we are here for them no matter what.”

“I have a 12 year old daughter. She lives with us but she doesn’t know we have HIV. When the time is right, when she’s older, I’ll talk to her and tell her what’s going on. I haven’t asked my mother yet but I know she will look after my daughter if me and my husband aren’t around any more.

More women need to change their behavior and get tested so they can know their status because the quicker they know, the better it is for them. Life goes on.”

“I have HIV and I won’t have anything to do with the voluntary counseling and testing center in the district where I live. I don’t trust them. My husband is dying and his family is caring for him. They don’t want me and my children so we’re left on our own. We moved in with some friends. I can’t take a chance that they find out about me, that I have HIV. I am afraid.”

Views on the current situation for affected children

“To say we’re only going to help children who are made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS is discrimination. We need a much stronger response to all vulnerable children and if some of those children happen to be affected by HIV/AIDS, it can be taken account of as part of this response.” - Ms. Rana Flowers, UNICEF

“There has to be the means to ensure that HIV/AIDS-affected children are provided for and afforded their rights.” - Mr. Denbigh Yorke, NOPCAN (National Organization for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect)

“There needs to be more education. Children will tease and that can make a person afraid of school... Children with AIDS need all the support we can give because it’s very difficult for them.” - Mr. Steve Enendo, TOLCA (Toledo Association for Children and Adolescents)

“We really need to develop a team of counselors specifically for children who are traumatized by their situation because of HIV/AIDS.” - Mr. Rodel Beltran, Alliance Against AIDS

“There should be other day care centers like ours made available across the country.” - Ms. Nadia Armstrong, Hand in Hand Day Care Center

“There are children out there who are living horrible realities. Each person in the community needs to do something to give children hope, care and support.” - Ms. Anna Silva, the Cornerstone Foundation

Discussion Topic**What experiences have you had or encountered of children affected by HIV/AIDS?****Told by people who work with or know people with HIV/AIDS**

“I was introduced to a family affected by HIV/AIDS. Their little girl was nine years old then, and she’d been given HIV when she was seven and had sex with a man in return for schoolbooks. She told me, ‘I know I’m going to die but every day till then I’m alive. I can eat fried chicken and ice-cream’.”

“They were both children with AIDS once. But they are dead now. They died because they liked to run off to the river and have sex. They were both 12 years old. They didn’t even use a condom. My cousin was a good friend to them. My cousin got a tattoo with a needle they all used. He has AIDS now. He gave AIDS to some girls at his school.”

“Often adolescents with HIV or with same sex preference are thrown out of the home by their family. They literally become street children... They are afraid of the authorities because of reprisal and punishment. They have no place to go and there is no consideration for their rights. They become transient to avoid discrimination and punishment. There is no visible support for this sector of the population.”

“I met a mother, father, and a child of four years old who had HIV/AIDS. The mother and father got so sick that they were in bed and neither of them could get up to look after the child. The mother was crying when she told me she had fever and her whole body ached, so she couldn’t even stand up. They said they were treated so badly at HECOPAB and the hospital that they didn’t want to go back, so they stayed at home and had no medication.”

“A lady with AIDS who has three children once told me, ‘Some days I don’t even have a bit of bread to have with my pills. When I have a bit of bread I give it to my children’.”



“Availability of medication is a problem. If the hospital doesn’t have certain medications for opportunistic infections the families often can’t afford to buy them elsewhere... Non-adherence is a big problem for children (because the pills taste bad) so we need to teach parents more. If a child vomits from taking his medication, you can’t just stop giving it.”

“I know a family where the mother and father have died of AIDS. They’ve left three children – one in high school and two in primary school. Their grandmother looks after them but she can’t make enough money to support them all. The one in high school was thrown out because he couldn’t afford to pay tuition any more. Right now they don’t have any light or water. They’re drinking water from a creek.”

Living With HIV/AIDS

Concerns for children affected by HIV/AIDS

Children affected by HIV/AIDS include those with the disease, those whose parents or other family members are infected by HIV, children who have to care for adults with AIDS, and orphaned children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS. Whether or not children know the HIV status of their parents, they can be severely affected by HIV/AIDS long before a parent dies.

The best thing an infected parent can do for their children is to go to a voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) center for advice on free medication and on lifestyle changes for a longer, healthier life. Sooner or later though, AIDS will develop and help will need to be sought to minimize the suffering of affected children.

Here are some of the issues that may need to be taken into consideration, types of help that can be found, and details of organizations that help affected families.

Mother to child HIV transmission

The risk of HIV being transmitted from a mother to her baby should be considered by any woman who knows she has HIV/AIDS or who does not know her HIV status. Once she decides she wants to become pregnant, or once she knows she is pregnant, she should seek medical attention. A program is in place which greatly reduces the chance of a baby being born with HIV. Steps need to be taken from the early stages of pregnancy onwards.



The importance of communication

Telling a child that one or both of their parents has HIV (or that the child has HIV) is an incredibly difficult thing to do and careful consideration needs to be given to how and when to approach this. VCT staff generally recommends that children are told what is happening, but the decision on when to do this must be made by the families themselves. Once a child is aware of changes in their life due to HIV/AIDS, it is important for communication to take place

because children should be allowed to express their emotions to a trusted adult. Children who understand the nature of HIV/AIDS may be afraid that they or their brothers and sisters might also be infected, so the benefits and disadvantages of testing should be discussed. Young people have the right to choose or refuse to be tested.



Effects to expect in children

Children can suffer from a variety of physical and psychological effects, from when their parents discover their HIV status until well beyond their death.

Parents often choose not to tell family members they have HIV, for fear of stigma and discrimination. As a result the burden of dealing physically and emotionally with the disease is carried in secret. The stress and loneliness this can cause, as well as the lack of extended family support, may result in a lot of tension in parents. This is likely to also be felt by children, whether or not they know their parents' HIV status.

If their status becomes known, stigma and discrimination can lead to parents losing their jobs, and the parents and children might be isolated from their extended family and discriminated against by their community. Children can suffer greatly from discrimination from their family, friends, and school, resulting in rejection, shame, and fear. There may also be fewer resources available to meet their nutritional and other basic needs.

In the later stages of AIDS parents will frequently be sick and unable to work. All adult attention may be focused on those who are ill and less time is devoted to childcare. The child may need to take on adult-like responsibilities such as caring for the parent, siblings, and the home. They are more likely to miss school days or have difficulties concentrating in class due to worries about their parent. Responding to the emotional needs of children in such rough times is vital.

Living With HIV/AIDS

Concerns for children affected by HIV/AIDS

Children should be helped to emotionally prepare for the death of their parent(s). Parents should also make legal arrangements for who will care for their children after their death. This can be done by meeting with an attorney or by the parent writing a statement of their wishes and having it signed by a Justice of the Peace. Children orphaned due to HIV/AIDS are frequently taken in by extended family, but this can cause financial, practical, and emotional strains on the family. At the same time, the child is not only dealing with the death of a parent, but often with separation from siblings as well. Children need to be shown a great deal of love and support to help them to recover from their losses.



Caring for children with HIV/AIDS

Children infected with HIV can still live for many years. Focus on the child's life and health instead of illness and death. Help the child to carry on with normal activities and to go to school as usual. Visit government health services for advice on nutrition, medication, and healthy living. Children with HIV tend to

develop opportunistic infections more easily than adults because a child's immune system is weaker. Try to keep your home clean and avoid common infections such as colds. Teach children healthy personal hygiene, such as washing hands after using the toilet and before eating. Good nutrition is also important for children to stay strong, to fight infections, and to prevent weight loss.

Help from the community

If one or both parents develop full-blown AIDS, it can become impossible to care for the family. Families affected by HIV/AIDS often need help in responding to their physical needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, medical services, and sanitation. Help may be needed with direct care (eg. bathing, feeding, or walking), general assistance (eg.



laundry, driving, shopping, and cleaning) and emotional support. Community involvement can become vital and often exists. Help can come from extended family, neighbors, faith groups, teachers, and women's organizations. If love and care are offered without stigma or discrimination children affected by HIV/AIDS might still have an opportunity to reach physical, emotional, economic, and spiritual success.

HIV/AIDS organizations helping families

- ◆ Positive Lives support group for people throughout the country, Alliance Against AIDS, Belize City, organized by Ms. Edna Novelo, 223-6493.
- ◆ Dangriga support group, Southern Regional Hospital, organized by Nurse Humphries, 522-3833.
- ◆ Belmopan support group, Western Regional Hospital, organized by Nurse Casey, 822-2263.
- ◆ The Dangriga HIV/AIDS Society, 502-0173, provides a range of support services including counseling.
- ◆ The Belmopan AIDS Committee, chaired by Mr. Mike Mendez, 610-1274, provides services as described in the district news section.
- ◆ Hand in Hand Ministries day care center and outreach services are described in the Belize District news.
- ◆ The Liberty Foundation, Ladyville, 225-2158, has a residential home for children and runs an outreach program offering support and assistance to parents with young children, including those with HIV/AIDS.
- ◆ The Living with Hope Foundation has funds available to support small-scale income generating activities for families in all districts who are affected by HIV/AIDS. Application forms are available at VCT centers and Alliance Against AIDS, and should be sent to the National AIDS Commission.

◆ Caring for Children networks operate countrywide to provide support and basic necessities to affected families. See the district news sections for details.

AIDS Link is grateful for the contributions of Sister Christine Kunze at Hand in Hand Ministries and of VCT staff towards the content of this article.

Who's Who

UNICEF: Standing up for children's rights

UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, is present in 158 countries and exists to protect children as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They advocate for children's rights and support programs that protect rights such as health care, education, equal treatment, and protection from abuse or harm.

As a significant threat to child survival and development in general, HIV/AIDS is one of UNICEF's top priorities. They seek to make a difference to the lives of children who are affected by HIV/AIDS through:

- supporting the prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV and ensuring pediatric treatment;
- assisting in efforts to halt infection among young people; and
- promoting networks and support systems for children affected and infected by HIV/AIDS.

UNICEF's efforts are designed to strengthen local partners. In Belize they work with a variety of organizations: from encouraging the important coordinating efforts of the National AIDS Commission, to providing the support needed to enable religious leaders to come together to form a faith-based response to HIV/AIDS. They also support efforts across Belize to confront stigma and discrimination, to stem the spread of the disease particularly among young adolescent girls, to promote life-skill learning in all schools, and to provide stronger community support to families affected by HIV/AIDS.



Most adolescents are now educated on the spread of HIV, but do not use this knowledge to protect themselves. Peer education has yielded some positive results in this regard, and UNICEF encourages national ownership

for and provides technical support to peer education programs, including those organized by the Belize Red Cross through the *Together We Can* initiative.

Set up by UNICEF in Belize, the XChange program is a movement of children for children, for positive adolescent development. XChange opens spaces where

adolescents can come together safely and discuss issues, identify solutions, and find the resources they need to reach those solutions. This includes a focus on what they think should be done to address and stop the spread of HIV. By building their confidence and sense of responsibility for each other and for their communities, they in turn feel valued and better protect themselves against sexually transmitted infections.

Protection and care of children affected by HIV/AIDS is also vital. As children have been largely invisible in the response to HIV/AIDS, UNICEF is encouraging better coordination of government efforts, with a clear accountability for vulnerable children. They are also encouraging a community-owned solution that overcomes stigma and discrimination and treats those affected with dignity and care.

UNICEF has therefore partnered with the Cornerstone Foundation to build a community response for the protection and care of orphans, vulnerable children, and their families. *Caring for Children* support networks have now been established and are operating in every district. Each network consists of health practitioners who assess families' needs, a person who manages confidential information, and a community information coordinator who links families' needs to caring support and services. Churches, businesses, schools, and individuals are keeping children in education and donating essential items from nutritional products to clothing.

Protect yourself:

Which of these things are safe, and which put you at risk of being infected by HIV?

- A giving a person with HIV a hug
- B having many sexual partners
- C sharing a needle to inject drugs or to get a tattoo
- D being near a person with HIV/AIDS who is sneezing or coughing
- E abstinence
- F using a public toilet
- G having vaginal or anal sex without using a condom
- H being bitten by a mosquito that has bitten someone with HIV/AIDS

Imagine you, or someone in your family, is ill. Circle the words below that describe what feelings and actions you would like from your friends:

- friendship, fear, love, hate, help, teasing, avoidance, understanding, thoughtfulness, rumors, abuse, caring...

Whether your illness is from a common cold or HIV, you would want to feel cared for.

Imagine there's an 8 year old girl living in a village. Her parents have little money and they are both sick with AIDS. The girl doesn't have HIV/AIDS. Get together with a friend. One of you can write about what the girl's life might be like if there is no stigma and discrimination in her village, while the other person writes what her life might be like if there is lots of stigma and discrimination. Compare your stories and discuss the differences between the two types of villages.

Children's Activities



Poster by a student at St. Andrews School in San Ignacio

Answers to "Protect yourself":

- A, D, E, F, and H are safe.
- B, C, and G put a person at risk from HIV.

Quiz:

(Answers on page 11)

1. What is the difference between HIV and AIDS?
2. What are the main ways for people to get HIV/AIDS?
3. How can you avoid getting HIV/AIDS?
4. How can you tell if a person has HIV/AIDS?
5. Is there treatment or a cure for AIDS?

Want to find out more about HIV/AIDS?

Have a look at these websites designed for young people:

- www.iwannaknow.org
- www.youthhiv.org
- www.avert.org



Nationwide HIV/AIDS News

New hope for HIV positive mothers

In December 2006 a new, improved protocol for the prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV (PMTCT) was issued: PMTCT Plus. Following these guidelines should further reduce the rate of mother to child transmission, which currently stands at around 10%. Pregnant women accessing government health services are advised to undergo HIV testing and counseling. Those mothers who are HIV positive are given a combination of three antiretrovirals (ARVs), from 14 weeks of pregnancy (compared with the previous system of only giving one ARV, during labor). Mothers with HIV are advised not to breastfeed, as in the earlier guidelines. PMTCT Plus also offers services to the entire family, including family planning and reproductive health services, nutritional support, and counseling. Training for healthcare providers is planned.

Emerging resistance to antiretrovirals

Reports have been received from Belize City that a number of people with AIDS are showing resistance to the type of ARV being provided across the country. These patients, including five children, have been taking ARVs but are still getting sick (showing clinical resistance). The only treatment that could help people in this situation is an alternative type of ARV. The Ministry of Health (MoH) is currently unable to provide an alternative, but efforts are being made to solve this.

Know Your Status campaign continues

The Ministry of Health's Know Your Status campaign ran through December and beyond. On World AIDS Day 800 people were tested for HIV around the country. This is the most tests ever conducted on a single day in Belize. A further 52 people were tested on 6th December at The Belize Defense Force (BDF) and 30 more were tested on BDF's Open Day on 3rd February. The intention is to continue with the campaign this year, by continuing to raise awareness of the importance of testing, and providing more free public site testing days.

Belize Family Life Association (BFLA)

In February BFLA received 300,000 condoms. Half of these have been given to MoH to be distributed to health institutions and the other half are being made available to non-health organizations. They can be

VCT centers increase stigma

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has advised MoH that the current separation of HIV/AIDS services from the rest of the health system contributes to stigma and discrimination. They recommend that HIV testing and counseling should instead be integrated into health services. Training of doctors, nurses, and pharmacists was conducted in 2006 in preparation for the new system, which is planned to be piloted from early this year. If experiences from several selected pilot sites are encouraging, integration will then take place countrywide.

9 out of 10 people with HIV are unaware they have it

It is estimated that about 90% of PLWHA in Belize do not know they have the disease because they have not been tested. The World Health Organization (WHO) realized this meant VCT has not been drawing in as many people as expected. To reach people who have the virus but do not know it, the WHO issued in November 2006 a draft guidance to introduce provider initiated testing. This will mean all adults and adolescents going to public or private healthcare facilities will be encouraged to get tested, regardless of their reason for going. VCT will still be available. MoH is working on plans for this.

UNIBAM expansion

The United Belize Advocacy Movement (UNIBAM), headed by Mr. Caleb Orozco, is an advocacy organization that uses a rights-based approach in addressing stigma and discrimination. Mr. Orozco and his team network with similar organizations internationally, give presentations on stigma and discrimination, and also work at an individual level, such as providing psychological support to HIV positive men who have sex with men (MSM). UNIBAM has recently expanded, with the addition of five part-time staff working in Belize, Cayo, and Orange Walk districts to address issues of importance to MSM. For more information on their services or to offer support see www.qbze.4t.com or call Mr. Orozco on 663-5641.

Alliance Against AIDS request feedback

The Alliance Against AIDS (AAA) is conducting a satisfaction survey to discover the views of people living with HIV/AIDS who have accessed their services. If you have made use of any AAA services, please call 223-6911 or 223-6493 to assess them.



News from Belize District

Services for children

Hand in Hand Ministries day care and outreach center accepts children up to the age of eight who are affected by HIV/AIDS. Medical care is provided by an on-site registered nurse and an on-call pediatrician. Daily health assessments are performed and antiretrovirals (ARVs) as well as medication for opportunistic infections are available. The caregivers of affected children are offered courses on HIV/AIDS, how to love and care for a child with special needs, parenting skills, life skills, job training, and cooking courses for healthy eating. Counseling services and support groups are also available. Call 227-0612 for further information.

Caring for Children is currently helping five families thanks to support from Santiago Castillo, St. Catherine's Academy, BTL, Belize Water Service, and other donors including primary and secondary schools. Families in need are most often given basic food and toiletry supplies. The children were given toys at Christmas, and some clients have been helped to find employment. Families who need assistance should contact Nurse Bradley at the VCT center (223-0541). Donations are needed. Call Mr. Troy Banner (227-0056) if you can help.

From the Cayes

HIV/AIDS information leaflets, VCT, condoms, and ARVs are all available for free at San Pedro's Polyclinic II. They conduct an average of three HIV tests per week, and the clinic currently has seven clients on ARVs. On the other hand, a number of private clinics on San Pedro, as well as the AIDS Committee, are suffering from a lack of HIV/AIDS leaflets. Free testing is not available in Caye Calker, so people there would need to go to San Pedro or Belize City, or attend one of the several testing days that occur each year when medical personnel from elsewhere visit the island. Counseling is available at the Caye Calker health center.

Other news

The YWCA will host a week of activities from 10th March to celebrate the anniversary of the YWCA in Belize. There will be a variety of events, including HIV/AIDS education, and newly-trained HIV/AIDS peer educators will be present on 17th March.

The Belize City Council will hold a Health Expo on 18th April at the NICH parking lot on Regent Street. There will be over 15 information booths displaying education on health issues in Belize. The theme is "Public Health, Everyone's Business".



News from Cayo District

Services for children

Caring for Children in Belmopan is helping six families. Most donations come through the Cornerstone Foundation and also from churches, politicians, and local communities. Typical donations are of food, purified water, soap, and chlorox. Caring for Children in San Ignacio is helping eight families who have requested mostly food and medication. The main donors are Atlantic Bank, St Andrew's Church, and the Holiness Temple. One family has also been 'adopted' by an individual. Ms. Anna Silva is looking for a donor to offer transport for PLWHA to visit the doctor in Belize City. Families who need assistance should contact Nurse Anderson at the Belmopan HECOPAB (822-2263) or Nurse Tennyson at the San Ignacio VCT center (824-3129). If you can help with donations, call Ms. Silva at Cornerstone, San Ignacio (824-2373).

Other news

The Belmopan AIDS Committee is running a feeding program, along with Garden City Primary School, to help PLWHA who need to be on a particular diet but cannot afford it. They are also working with My Refuge to be able to offer temporary shelter to PLWHA who have lost or been thrown out of their home, until they can find a place of their own. The committee's outreach work is going strong, with Youth With a Mission conducting HIV/AIDS education in schools, and a group from Illinois due to visit in March to provide further outreach.

The staff at San Ignacio's VCT center is continuing with Rotary-funded outreach work in villages and workplace testing. Workplace testing has been very effective, with around 90% of participants getting tested at most locations.



News from Stann Creek District

Services for children

The main needs of families affected by HIV/AIDS have been for education (tuition fees, books, and uniforms) and groceries. The Caring for Children network organizers have lists of individuals and businesses who have committed to supporting the program. Families who need assistance should contact Nurse Humphries at HECOPAB (522-3833). If you can help with donations, call Ms. Simpson at the Education Department (522-2111).

Other news

As a continuation of the Ministry of Health's Know Your Status campaign, free testing days are planned for the last Friday of every month in the market place.

At the initiative of two PLWHA who met at the VCT center, a support group was established at the end of January. The group currently has around five members who meet every two weeks to have an opportunity to talk about issues relevant to their lives and to exchange ideas on how to cope with the disease. Hospital staff members provide talks on topics chosen by the group.

The Dangriga HIV/AIDS Society has worked on two UNFPA projects in December and January: 15 people were trained in HIV testing and counseling, and a conference was held on how bush doctors, traditional healers, buyeis, and doctors can collaborate more in supporting PLWHA. The Society has a variety of plans for 2007, including assessing the potential for a day care center for children affected by HIV/AIDS in Dangriga, and reprinting leaflets about sexually transmitted infections in Kekchi Maya.

A powerful collective force has been formed by groups such as POWA, BFLA, UNICEF, the Dangriga HIV/AIDS Society, the town council, the women's department, and human development. These organizations are working together to link HIV/AIDS to other problems faced by children and to find solutions. They are about to bring out a CD with contributions by local artists, giving messages about reducing stigma and discrimination and protecting yourself from HIV. A pamphlet with information on important community issues is also being produced.



News from Corozal District

Services for children

Caring for Children representative, Ms. Alcoser, has stated, "My commitment is to assist these families in need on a permanent basis and to sensitize the community and obtain participation which is of paramount importance for the success of this undertaking." The Corozal network is currently assisting ten families, including eight adults and 32 children. At their December fundraiser donated prizes were raffled, Community Nurses Aides (CNAs) made tamales to sell, other food was donated, and Bowen and Bowen provided free soft drinks and the loan of a tent. A total of \$800 was raised to help families. Donations from Atlantic Bank staff and customers paid for two crates of chicken to give to families at Christmas. Regular donations come from CNAs who bring in food and basic household items to their monthly meetings. Radio Bahia has offered free advertising for HIV/AIDS events such as fundraisers. Ms. Alcoser plans to approach local

businesses to request commitments to the program. Families needing assistance can call Nurse Magana at HECOPAB (422-2080). To make a donation call Ms. Alcoser at 422-3473 or drop items off at the donation box located at Atlantic Bank.

Other news

Members of a committee of 16 volunteers trained by Alliance Against AIDS have formed a plan to provide HIV/AIDS information to various groups and to encourage them to talk about HIV/AIDS with others. The aim is to target youths in Libertad, Progreso, and Concepcion, food vendors, teachers, and taxi drivers over the next eight months.

The staff at the VCT center has been campaigning in town and in the free zone to encourage more people to get tested.



News from Toledo District

Services for children

Caring for Children has been helping five families, with families taking turns to receive help. Cash donations are given to stores. Families who have been approved for assistance are then given permission slips to buy groceries and other basic household items. Caring for Children can also provide funds if families need to go to the pediatrician in Belize City. Donations have been made by the Toledo Pastor's Association, the Belize teachers' credit union, several churches in Belize and California, Belize Bank, and other organizations, but many more donations are needed. Several local businesses are offering discounts to people buying goods for the program. Families in need of assistance can contact Nurses Alvarez and Avilez at the Punta Gorda psychiatric clinic (722-2026). To donate items call Mr. Dennis Steinmetz (625-2668) or the Toledo Pastors' Association.

The Toledo Association for Children and Adolescents (TOLCA) was formed in 2005 from various governmental and non-governmental organizations that deal with children. They aim to improve services for children and adolescents, and are in discussion with UNICEF with the hope of conducting preventive HIV/AIDS education as well as providing help to those affected by the disease.

Other news

The Know Your Status campaign has been very successful in Toledo. A total of approximately 200 people were tested at public testing events conducted in the civic center as well as in six villages. There was a particularly good reception in the villages where many people who are unable to afford the bus trip to the VCT center in town could make use of mobile testing. Repeat tests are planned to be offered in these villages in three months.



News from Orange Walk District

Services for children

14 families, with a total of 41 children, have been helped by Caring for Children. The customs office has been providing goods such as rice, flour minsa, maseca, cooking oil and vegetables. The Mennonite community has also been generous, providing sacks of rice and flour. Community Nurses Aides are very involved and each tries to bring in a small donation for the program when they come in every month for training. Families in need of assistance

can contact Nurse Sanchez at HECOPAB (322-2072). If you can help with donations, contact Sister Marilyn Panton at Muffles College (322-2033).

Other news

The AIDS Committee remains dormant, but has been visited by the National AIDS Commission as part of plans to reactivate district AIDS committees countrywide.

Answers to the Quiz on page 7:

1. HIV is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. The virus breaks down a person's immune system (the body's natural defense against disease), leaving them vulnerable to other infections. AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. This is the combination of symptoms caused by illnesses that can happen to a person when their immune system is weakened by HIV.
2. HIV can be transmitted by having sex with an infected person without using a condom, by sharing a needle with an infected person (for tattooing or for injecting drugs), or by an infected mother passing HIV to her baby during pregnancy, while giving birth, or by breastfeeding.
3. The safest way to avoid catching HIV is to abstain from sex and avoid sharing needles. You are also safe from HIV if you have one sexual partner, you both get negative results from HIV tests, and you are both faithful. Correct and consistent use of condoms protects from HIV.
4. You cannot tell if a person has HIV/AIDS by looking at them because they may not show any symptoms and they can look completely healthy. If they do show symptoms, they may be similar to symptoms of other illnesses. The only way to know for certain is to have an HIV test.
- 5 Even though no medically proven cure has been found for AIDS, antiretroviral medications have been developed which can keep a person with AIDS healthy for many years.

Poetry
Competition!

Theme
Does HIV/AIDS affect children?

Deadline
6th April

Students are invited to write poems to express their feelings about the effects of HIV/AIDS on children.

Instructions

- ◆ Poems should be no more than 12 lines
- ◆ Entries should reflect contest theme
- ◆ One entry per person
- ◆ Tell us your name, age, and location
- ◆ Submit your entry by 6th April

The winning entry
will be published in the
next issue of *AIDS Link!*

Submit entries to

- ◆ AIDSLink@hotmail.com, or
- ◆ The Cornerstone Foundation
P.O. Box 242, San Ignacio

AIDS Link evaluation

How are we doing?

Thank you to everyone who filled in the *AIDS Link* mid-year report. The responses showed that people think the layout of the newsletter is very good, the language used is satisfactory, but there is slightly too much information. Sections' average ratings (out of 5) are:

Life with HIV/AIDS story = 4.6
Living with HIV/AIDS advice = 4.5
Discussion topic = 4.0
District news = 3.9
National news = 3.9
Regional news = 3.7
World news = 3.6

Many useful suggestions were put forward, which we will be taking account of, including:

- ◆ Having a section for students
- ◆ Increased input from PLWHA
- ◆ More information for referrals
- ◆ Information on grants
- ◆ The link between HIV/AIDS in youth and crime/violence
- ◆ The dangers of tattoos

Does anybody know?

If you have a question about the effects of HIV/AIDS on children, or about any other HIV/AIDS topic, please write to us. We will try to find the best person to respond, and then publish questions and answers in the next issue.

Employment opportunity

The position of editor of *AIDS Link* will be available from August 2007. Please contact *AIDS Link* now for application details.

I care. Do you?

Continued from Page 1

was biscuits and water, but she found it hard to eat or swallow. The little girl was trying to lift her half-way up so she could drink water. She couldn't do anything for herself so her daughter had to do everything for her until she died. She had wanted her children to be cared for by a certain guardian, but she had nothing legal. After she died the children were placed with the last people the woman wanted them to go to."

AIDS Link

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AIDS Link

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