Providing support for HIV/AIDS patients in Zimbabwe

by Seeds of Hope: Sisters in Action Around the World

GWERU, MIDLANDS PROVINCE, ZIMBABWE

The Rutendo HIV/AIDS project was initiated in 2003, by Sisters of the Child Jesus, to provide human and social relief for people infected with HIV/AIDS. The project is located in Mkoba High Density suburb on the West side of Gweru City in the Midlands Province of central Zimbabwe. Besides providing food, clothes, herbal medicine, nutrition counseling, and bereavement support to home-based patients, the program has mobilized the community for HIV/AIDS workshops that raise awareness of the need for behavior change to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, especially among youth-leaders and young adults.
In a recent General Chapter, the Sisters of the Child Jesus (SCJ) officially declared their commitment to help people infected and affected by the current devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic. Two SCJ sisters spearheaded the endeavor and seven others provided administrative and governance support. Three lay people (two social workers and an administrative assistant/accountant) were employed to assist the sisters.

**Impact of the HIV/AIDS Pandemic**

Zimbabwe has one of the world’s highest incidences of HIV/AIDS. Five million (about 33%) of those infected are between the ages 10 to 19. The majority of those affected by AIDS live below the poverty line because they are usually unable to work. They live in crowded small huts, without clean water, food, or sanitation. Because the huts lack adequate space, the children have taken to the streets. They sleep in tunnels or in other warm places and eat out of garbage cans. Some earn money by guarding or washing cars and others move into prostitution or other criminal activity to earn better income.

The people are semi-literate and lack job skills. Hence they are unable to rise above their miserable living conditions. Unemployment prevails, giving way to a "dependence syndrome." Women in particular need to be emancipated from traditional, social, and economic injustice.

Families in rural areas have small farms to cultivate, but drought over the past several years has made production very limited. Families have not been able to produce enough food for daily consumption. As one Zimbabwean stated, "If we have a meal a day, we are lucky."

Although there may be health care services available in town or village regions, most of the people with HIV/AIDS cannot afford the services or the medicine.

**The Rutendo HIV/AIDS Project**

The project began in 2003, when three sisters visited the local Catholic Primary School and Parish families to identify HIV/AIDS orphans in Mkoba High Density suburb. In addition to their search for orphaned HIV/AIDS victims, the sisters found many sick and bed ridden AIDS patients at home due to overcrowded hospitals where less than adequate care could be expected. A directory of names and detailed information along with photos for each family visited was prepared for use by the Rutendo Office.

In 2004, the sisters organized a group of volunteer care givers who were trained to reinforce the work of the sisters in the homes.

**Advertisement**

In 2005, a grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters played a key role in getting the program up and running. It helped support HIV/AIDS testing, educational courses, aid to orphans, and counseling and support groups. It also provided support for communities to establish home-based care services.

In 2006, a nutrition and herbal garden was begun to provide herbal medicine and nutritious food for the home-bound HIV/AIDS patients. It was also during this year that the sisters initiated an infor-mation and awareness-raising program for youth groups. The program encouraged the need for behavior change that would prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

In 2007, a series of workshops was initiated to help build good relationships between the patients and care
givers. Using a pre-test/post-test assessment model, the workshops focused on basic knowledge and understanding of reproductive health and behavioral change designed to curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS. In addition to formal group presentations and discussions, the workshops involved recreational activities, visits to orphaned children and home-based patients, and the giving of alms. They are located in both the city and rural areas:

- A "Window of Hope" group was started in Mkoba High Density Suburb
- A "Seed of Hope" group was begun in a more rural, remote area about 150km from Gweru City

Conducted every three months, the workshops cover a wide spectrum of topics:

- Behavioral change and communication
- Causes and definitions of HIV/AIDS
- Mode of HIV/AIDS transmission
- Prevention of the HIV/AIDS virus
- The use of anti-retroviral drugs
- Herbal medicines (names, how to grow them and use them)
- Nutrition gardens and herbs
- Health reproductive awareness and peer education
- Home visits and basic home nursing
- Giving alms and helping hands for the bed ridden at home and in the field

The current Rutendo HIV/AIDS Center is a family house with four bedrooms, a multipurpose room used for recreation, meetings, and workshops. All other activities (for home-based care givers, youths and orphans) are held outdoors. Plans are being made to find a location for a larger facility that would accommodate the activities for home-based care givers, youths, orphans, and implementers.

Currently, the project is operating in ten villages, but requests continue to come forward. Given the
opportunity and permit for new land, the project would--without doubt--begin to gain rapid momentum in the Mkoba communities.

**Strategies that Contributed to the Success of the Project**

The project was communicated through announcements, letters to stakeholders, posters, and word of mouth at Churches, beer halls, community halls, local government schools, and other NGO places.

Through cooperation and sharing with local agencies (Catholic Development Commission, AIDS service organizations, Midlands Aids Services Organizations (MASO), the Red Cross, Social Welfare Office, City Council, District and National AIDS organizations), a good deal of knowledge and experience was learned by the staff, which paid off in the prevention of mistakes along the way.

In developing the HIV/AIDS project, some strategies that were especially helpful included the following:

- Attending meetings and workshops offered by other non-governmental organizations and government ministries
- Maintaining good relationships with local community people and stakeholders
- Completing monthly activity forms required by the government, which helped to keep the staff on target regarding goals and objectives
- Operating the project with a spirit of co-operation and coordination
- Maintaining a strong commitment to duty

**The Rutendo HIV/AIDS Project Staff**

In addition to 32 volunteer care givers for the community outreach program, a team of five full-time staff members operate the Rutendo HIV/AIDS Project:

- Project Manager
- Youth Advisor
- HIV/AIDS counselor
- Food Manager secretary and
- Computer operator
Change of the Project Manager in 2007, was facilitated by the fact that the incoming manager was already involved in the project and very familiar with its goals and objectives. Furthermore, the outgoing manager briefed the new manager about the job responsibilities and the unfinished business that needed to be addressed.

Sustainability and Expansion

The financial administration of the project has been placed in the hands of professionally trained personnel. Good accounting practices, adequate record keeping, and financial statements help to maintain the kind of transparency expected. Moreover, donors are kept informed about the progress demonstrated through services offered, numbers served, and program results achieved, along with records that give an account of the expenditure of funds.

New ways of fund raising activities are being considered, for example: raising poultry and rabbits, gardening, soap making and lotion making, and sewing and knitting baby clothes. However, economic constraints in the local community, in the Sisters of the Child Jesus religious congregation, and largely in the country of Zimbabwe, along with skyrocketing inflation, unemployment, droughts and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, make fund raising efforts extremely challenging. These depressing economic conditions have been and continue to be the greatest obstacle to sustainability.

Regular evaluations include procedures for both internal and external assessment. Internal evaluations consist of weekly staff meetings, which focus on the work of the previous week and set direction for the upcoming week. Monthly meetings with care givers focus on the care of current HIV cases in the respective villages, as well as bed-bound, home-based care, recent deaths, the needs of new orphans, and any residential changes. External monthly evaluations, conducted by the government, involve the completion of activity forms which give an account of the activities sponsored by each organization. Minutes for the weekly and monthly meetings are kept on file along with follow-up reports.

Plans to expand the project were curtailed because permission from the Gweru City Council was not granted for expansion of the center. Approval was withheld because the grounds adjacent to the present center were ear-marked for a new business center which was in the process of being built. The city council, however, promised to identify another area where a bigger center could be built. At the time of this writing, word about the new area was still pending. Meetings with the town planning authority, however, have moved forward with planning and construction procedures.

Suggestions for Initiating Similar Projects
Begin by identifying the priority issues and specific needs of the local community.

- Formulate a concrete plan that highlights the needs with clearly stated goals, objectives and time frames for achieving the objectives.
- Involve the local community people to encourage acceptance of the project and to assure long term sustainability and social security.
- Form a community Board of Directors who represent government and non-governmental organizations with a similar mission, church-sponsored organizations, and professionals needed for their expertise in law, finances and communications.
- Program finances to assure accountability and transparency in reporting practices.

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