



MARCH 2009 NEWSLETTER

# The United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief

A MONTHLY UPDATE ON THE U.S. COMMITMENT  
TO TURN THE TIDE AGAINST GLOBAL HIV/AIDS

## Prioritizing Gender in the Fight against HIV/AIDS



On March 8, the world celebrated International Women's Day. A day to recognize the achievements and successes of women around the globe, it also drew attention to the challenges women must overcome to secure gender equity. Recognizing these challenges, the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) works to address gender inequalities worldwide in an effort to reduce the vulnerability of women and men to HIV infection.

Today, approximately 58 percent of all people living with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa are female. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has estimated that women represent 41 percent of HIV-positive labor force participants worldwide (43 percent in sub-Saharan Africa). And in some countries, girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have three to six times higher HIV prevalence than boys their age.

Efforts to address gender issues are central to HIV prevention programs supported by PEPFAR. Without consideration of the context in which girls and women negotiate sexual behavior and practices, prevention efforts will fail, said Assistant PEPFAR Coordinator Michele Moloney-Kitts at a PEPFAR co-sponsored panel entitled "Integrating Gender into a Locally-Owned HIV/AIDS Response" in March.

To confront the changing demographics of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, PEPFAR integrates gender throughout prevention, care, and treatment activities by way of five gender strategies: increasing gender equity in HIV/AIDS programs and services; reducing violence and coercion; addressing male norms and behaviors; increasing women's legal protection; and increasing women's access to income and productive resources.

Mestawot Wase's story is a prime example of how PEPFAR-supported gender programming is transforming lives.

Accustomed to verbal and physical abuse, the 33-year-old Ethiopian mother of three lived in constant fear of her husband's wrath. When her husband brought



Photo by Ethiopia PEPFAR Team

While trimming hair in her barbershop, Mestawot Wase discusses the consequences of HIV/AIDS infection and provides customers with prevention messaging.

home a second wife, Mestawot's life became unbearable. She took her children, left her husband, and relocated to another village. But soon after the move, Mestawot heard that her husband had died and then she, herself, became ill. Suspecting the worst, Mestawot and her children visited a clinic to be tested for HIV and discovered that both she and her eldest son were HIV-positive.

Looking to her friends and neighbors for support, Mestawot found none. As a result of her status, the

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## In Namibia, CD Raises HIV/AIDS Awareness Among Truckers



Recently, the U.S. Embassy in Namibia donated 500 copies of the *NamibiAlive II* CD to the Walvis Bay Corridor Group's HIV/AIDS Help Desk. The CDs, which were produced to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS, will be given to truck drivers in an effort to educate and prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS amongst industry employees.

"I am proud to be in partnership with the Walvis Bay Corridor Group HIV/AIDS Help Desk. ... They have the expertise and the contact with truck drivers to continue its success. Without these partnerships, we cannot be successful in ridding Namibia of this disease," said Ray Castillo, Public Affairs Officer.

*NamibiAlive II* is an album that was produced by two Peace Corp volunteers — Will Garneau and Beth Phillips — in 2008 that contains songs and messages about HIV/AIDS prevention, stigma reduction and positive living from some of Namibia's most popular musicians. The American Cultural Center funded the project through a grant from the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

The CDs given to the Walvis Bay Corridor Group will be distributed at weigh bridges around the country, as part of its collaboration with the Roads Authority, to



Photo by Namibia PEPFAR Team

A Walvis Bay Corridor Group member hands a Namibian truck driver a copy of the *NamibiAlive II* CD.

all of the Group's participating member companies. It will also be distributed in the 'Truckers' Toolkits. These Toolkits include items such as condoms, prevention pamphlets and first aid supplies.

The concept behind this innovative project was to offer prevention messages to this high-risk community while they listen to their favorite artists. To date, the Peace Corps Volunteers and the U.S. Embassy's Public Affairs Office have distributed five thousand CDs to bus, taxi, and truck drivers for free.

Mr. Edward Shivute, Project Coordinator of the Walvis Bay Corridor Group HIV/AIDS Help Desk, expressed enthusiasm about this partnership.

"Our experience has revealed that workplace programs alone are not effective in terms of reaching truck drivers and this is due to the fact that truckers spend more than 90 percent of their time on the road when on duty. ... We are, therefore, adamant that HIV/AIDS education through music is one of the sustainable approaches. And it is against this reasoning that we believe that this generous donation of *NamibiAlive II* CDs from the American people does not only contain HIV/AIDS messages from some of our local talents, but also provides some sort of entertainment through local music."

Currently, an estimated 15.3 percent of Namibia's adult population is HIV-positive.



Photo by Namibia PEPFAR Team

This toolkit — containing condoms, HIV prevention pamphlets and first aid supplies — is distributed to truckers by the Walvis Bay Corridor Group.

## Lighthouse Foundation Reaches Villagers in South Africa's North West Province



HIV/AIDS workers took advantage of an outdoor event held in South Africa's North West Province to educate the crowd about HIV/AIDS. Armed with clipboards, these Lighthouse Foundation employees walked among festival attendees urging them to get tested for HIV/AIDS and to receive home visits to learn more about the disease.

"Men, the ways of our grandfathers and fathers are past. We have to change," HIV/AIDS activist Tshepo Monyuku said to a group gathered at the outdoor festival. "If we men have multiple partners and our partners have multiple partners, then we will spread the disease and kill ourselves, our women and our children."

The Lighthouse Foundation — a local partner supported by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) in Jericho, South Africa — employs 28 people who work to tackle HIV/AIDS in 21 villages in South Africa's North West Province. The Foundation, founded and led by Tshepo and Nkele Ditsele, employs education and behavioral change methods to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS.

While staffers admit it can be a long and tough process to address problems and ingrained behaviors such as multiple sexual partners, poverty and lack of job skills that plague these villages, they never stop trying.

Lighthouse employees visit clinical waiting rooms to educate women about HIV/AIDS. They visit remote villages to gather statistics pertaining to HIV/AIDS and raise awareness about the disease. And they explain to their neighbors how the virus spreads.

However, the Foundation does not solely focus on women and children. Recognizing that this is an inclusive epidemic, Lighthouse actively engages South African men in the fight against HIV/AIDS. To reach a male



Photo by South Africa PEPFAR Team

Lighthouse Foundation Director and Co-founder, Tshepo Ditsele (far right), with villagers that he has trained as counselors. These men and women visit rural areas to encourage HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness.

population that spends long hours working at distant mines or cities and afterhours at local bars, Lighthouse workers organize men's forums. These forums give men a venue to talk honestly, openly and across generations about HIV/AIDS. The participants' age ranges from 21 to 75 years.

As a result of its achievements in the fight against HIV/AIDS, Lighthouse Foundation is now hoping to address cross-sectoral issues. The Foundation has plans to buy a plot of land, drill a well and plant vegetables in order to provide better nutrition for communities. And although not a fixture in their organization yet, Lighthouse is developing methods to teach income generation skills, such as masonry, dress making, beadwork and carpentry, to young people.

## WORLD TB DAY

*March 24, 2009*

Tuberculosis (TB) kills almost 5000 people each day, and is the leading cause of death for people living with HIV/AIDS. PEPFAR is working to improve the diagnosis and treatment of TB for co-infected persons, and is engaged in infection control efforts to prevent new cases of TB. Visit [www.PEPFAR.gov](http://www.PEPFAR.gov) to learn more about how PEPFAR is supporting activities to address TB/HIV.

## In Ethiopia, Three Young Women Educate Classmates



On March 5, 2009, the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa honored three female students, Bezawit Demessu, Yodit Tesfaye and Medhanit Bogale, who excelled at raising awareness about HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence (GBV) through their school's mini media — a media center on campus that students use to inform, educate and entertain fellow classmates.

“We rely on leaders like you who have the courage to speak out about HIV/AIDS, reproductive health and gender-based violence,” said Aberra Mekonnen, Chief of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Basic Education Services. “Today I would like to congratulate you all and ask you to continue to raise awareness of safe sex, and that violence against women and girls is unacceptable, that it harms development, and damages lives and opportunities.”

The contest was developed by the U.S. Embassy and Ethiopia's AIDS Resource Center with support from the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AID Relief (PEPFAR.) Together they surveyed the 20 public high schools in the area that had mini media centers and created a venue for teachers to nominate students that used these centers to spread awareness about HIV/AIDS and GBV. After all 60 nominees were reviewed and scored, it was Demessu, Tesfaye and Bogale's courage and innovation that won them the awards from the U.S. Embassy.

Demessu, the first place winner, received an award for educating her schoolmates about HIV/AIDS and reproductive health through organized traditional coffee ceremonies and her school's mini media. In addition to raising awareness through her school's media outlets, Demessu also continually encouraged her schoolmates to get tested



Photo by Ethiopia PEPFAR Team

Award winners Demessu, Tesfaye and Bogale are honored for their work in raising awareness about HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence at their schools in Ethiopia.

for HIV and accompanied them to test centers if asked. Tesfaye received the second place award for her efforts to raise funds to strengthen the HIV-related programming in her school and for empowering and encouraging fellow female students to participate in mini media. Third place winner Bogale received the award for her leadership in the revival of her school's mini media and her innovative and outstanding HIV-related mini media programs.

U.S. Embassy's Deputy Chief of Mission Deborah Malac praised the work of the three young ladies while presenting them with their awards.

“PEPFAR supports efforts to provide women with economic opportunities to empower them to avoid high-risk behaviors, seek and receive health care services, and care for their families,” she said. “We admire the courage you have shown in your schools to avert the impact of HIV.”

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people she once trusted now avoided contact with her for fear of contracting HIV. Stigmatized and traumatized, Mestawot began to attend support meetings sponsored by PEPFAR. Together, the group worked to find common strategies to combat stigma and discrimination, such as creating support networks and expanding HIV/AIDS awareness.

“These strangers welcomed me in a way that my relatives didn't,” said Mestawot.

After becoming an outspoken community leader thanks to the strength she garnered at the PEPFAR-supported meetings, Mestawot decided to enter a line of

work that would allow her to earn a living while raising HIV/AIDS awareness. With the 500 Birr (US \$50) she was lent by the support group, Mestawot opened a barbershop. Today, her barbershop is thriving, and she has touched many customers with her story of resilience.

Mestawot is just one of the many women who have benefited from PEPFAR-supported gender interventions. In fiscal year 2008, PEPFAR dedicated more than \$1 billion to over 1,000 activities that included interventions to address one or more gender focus areas. For more information on PEPFAR's gender activities, please visit: [www.pepfar.gov/press/76365.htm](http://www.pepfar.gov/press/76365.htm).