Substance Abuse Prevention among Youth in Russia: An Effective and Easily Replicable Model

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ISSUES

The HIV epidemic in Russia is driven largely by injecting drug use. PSI surveys show that Russian youth begin experimenting with drugs between the ages of 12 and 14 and injecting drugs between the ages of 14 and 17. Among young people aged 11 to 24, 13-15% use illegal psychoactive substances. This is equivalent to 4 to 6 million youth in Russia. Disadvantaged teens have limited access to drug-free, constructive environments and to accurate information about HIV and drug use risks.

DESCRIPTION

Introduced in 2007, the "Youth Center" (YC) is a modular, youth-focused HIV and Substance Abuse Prevention (SAP) model aimed at reducing drug use and HIV transmission. It includes provision of positive leisure opportunities to attract youth to the program, accurate HIV and drug prevention information, social skills training for youth, family therapy, and referrals to partner medical, psychological, and social services. Educators and health providers receive intensive, multi-session training to strengthen knowledge and skills in HIV/SAP, stigma reduction, and communication skills with teenagers and parents. YC has expanded to five cities in Russia (Gatchina, Orsk, Krasnodar, Yekaterinburg and St Petersburg) and is tailored to varied state educational institutions and municipal youth medical, leisure, sports and social centers.

More than 10,000 youth have been reached with leisure activities, and more than 8,000 youth and 1,700 parents have been trained in HIV and SAP prevention. Over 6,000 youth have been provided with medical and non-medical counseling and 150 families provided with family therapy. Post-intervention surveys show that youth who participate in the program exhibit positive changes in attitudes and knowledge related to HIV, including:

- More than 90% express improved ability to communicate, assert themselves, and manage their emotions (up from 40% at pre-intervention);
- More than 98% correctly identified all methods of HIV transmission (up from 42% at pre-intervention);
- 90% agree that delayed sexual intercourse reduces the risk of HIV infection (up from 53% at pre-intervention); and,
- Only 2% agreed that HIV-positive people should be excluded from their “close circle” (down from 14% at pre-intervention).

LESSONS LEARNED

- The YC model is effective in linking leisure, education, healthcare, social, and law enforcement institutions that are vital to addressing HIV and substance abuse prevention among at-risk youth.
- Youth are open to behavior change messages delivered in an interactive, respectful and non-didactic manner.
- Progressive, multi-session training for professionals is essential to reducing stigma and ensuring delivery of accurate information and non-biased services.
- Improved life skills and an awareness of health risks combined with positive leisure alternatives could result in a reduction in drug use and HIV infection among at-risk youth in Russia.
- The YC model is easy to replicate and can be tailored and introduced at low cost into any youth-oriented structure. It is sustainable as it is based in existing municipal and community facilities.

NEXT STEPS

The YC model will continue to serve clients and can serve as a resource to share experiences, provide training programs for professionals, and assist in the replication of the model in other places.

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