Capacity Building for Professional Peer-led Harm Reduction in Thailand

Authors: Ngammee, Veeraphan; Sarovat, Lawan; Gray, Robert; Duke, Alex;

BACKGROUND

The estimated number of injecting drug users (IDUs) in Thailand varies widely, ranging between 20,000-200,000, with HIV prevalence consistently reported between 30% and 40% within this group. IDUs in Thailand are a hard to reach group that are often disconnected from existing health care services.

Drug using peers have become one of the most important channels to reach IDUs in Thailand. The country’s five-year national program supported by Global Fund, which aims to provide a comprehensive package of prevention and treatment services, works with IDU peers to provide social support, prevention products, referrals to treatment, and other services for people who use drugs.

However, due to a combination of factors, the program has encountered high attrition among peers, reaching more than 30% per year.

Initial results from research into peer educator motivation indicated the following factors contribute to burn out and subsequent high attrition:

- Peer educators often feel alone, inadequately supported by drop-in center staff
- There are inadequate processes for defining and measuring success in work leading to the perception among peer educators that their efforts are not achieving impact
- Their expectations of developing the set of skills and helping to manage their own lives upon becoming peer educators are not being realised

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

To increase retention rates among IDU peers, Population Services International (PSI), the Global Fund Principal Recipient, emphasizes building a sense of responsibility and inclusion among peers in being part of the solution to HIV prevention, improving self-perception and demonstrating the positive role that IDUs can play.

To achieve this, PSI is developing a package of training and support services:

- Establishing professional standards for peers, including planning for personal and professional development
- Improved technical trainings; HIV and other health risks associated with injecting; principles of harm reduction; how to approach friends; how to analyse the needs of friends and provide services to address these needs
- Professional and peer counseling for peers
- Advocacy for communities to recognize the work of peers
- Improved salary compensation

CONCLUSION

The program is showing early positive results:

- Peer counselors are working in all sites.
- The program has set a goal of promotion for one IDU peer to become a member of staff per drop-in centre in 2011.
- PSI has increased compensation rates and promoted some peer educators as peer educator leaders.
- Peers are now participating in provincial government meetings.
- The number of peers joining the program has increased, and peer attrition is on target to be halved by 2011.
- Qualitative research conducted by PSI (initial findings summarised left) will provide insight into personal motivational factors, lifestyle and environmental factors that influence peer engagement in the program.
- The research will help tailor the support package to peers to increase capacity and program impact.

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For more information contact: Veeraphan Ngammee (veeraphan@psithailand.org)