

Educating, Empowering, Employing: AIDS Awareness, Stigma Reduction and Human Rights Protection Program Delivered by People Living with AIDS

Roatan is a small island in the Caribbean off the coast of Honduras, and with approximately 28,000 people, is the most heavily populated of the Bay Islands. Known for its sandy beaches and spectacular diving, Roatan is an island of extreme wealth and excessive poverty. Its economy has grown exponentially in the past four years due to tourism, real estate, and the arrival of expatriates establishing vacation homes, permanent residences and business. The influx of dollars has further increased the population with migrants and squatters from the mainland, where approximately 60% of Hondurans live below the poverty line. Investments in the tourist industry have failed to trickle down to the majority of the poor, nor have they resulted in needed infrastructure to address the island's increased growth.

The AIDS Concern

Honduras has the highest number of HIV/AIDS cases in Central America with 17,000 cases reported since the beginning of the epidemic. AIDS is the number one killer in Honduras, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Roatan has the second highest rate of AIDS per capita next to San Pedro Sula, the nation's economic capital. Change for Children's partner organization in Roatan, **Familias Saludables (FS)**, estimates the rate of HIV/AIDS in Roatan to be as high as 1 in 10. Testing has been available on the island for approximately three years, with five to fifteen positive tests monthly. Although there has been some government response to the crisis, like the allocation of funds for the free testing of all pregnant women and free anti-retroviral therapy for all infected individuals (ARVs), organizations like **Familias Saludables** and public health facilities including the Roatan Hospital, still lack necessary supplies like testing materials, condoms and medical supplies.

Few educational resources exist in Roatan and the Bay Islands to address the lack of awareness, fear and stigma surrounding AIDS. Psychosocial and economic support is not available for People Living With AIDS (PLWA) and their families. Employers are prohibited by law to discriminate against PLWAs, yet most workers are required to carry HIV Negative status cards. The problem of turning policy to action is reinforced in the schools' failure to include HIV/AIDS and sexual and reproductive health in the curriculum, despite being legislated to do so. The under-funded education system remains a barrier because it cannot afford educated teachers, and only provides schooling to grade six. Impoverished children and teens work, beg, and prostitute themselves instead of attending school.



HIV/AIDS has become the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age. Despite the increased availability of testing and treatment, the majority of pregnant women do not access them. The largest barriers to testing include fear of discrimination, lack of education and inconsistent prenatal care for all women. It is estimated that less than one in ten pregnant women at risk actually get tested during their pregnancy. Mother to child transmission of HIV contributes to a pediatric death rate 10 times higher than Canada's.

Familias Saludables: The Program

Change for Children's partner organization here, **Familias Saludables (FS)** has a program designed to reduce Mother To Child Transmissions (MTCTs), reduce general transmissions, and to support women, children and their families presently infected. The **Familias Saludables Program** includes three components:

Clinical Care focuses on free and confidential testing for the entire Bay Island population and the provision of prenatal care for all mothers. **Familias Saludables** helps to manage the pregnancies of HIV positive mothers including ARV treatment for women and babies. An infant formula program further works to reduce transmission rates via breast milk.

The Home Visitor Program provides PLWAs and their families with home support and education. **Familias Saludables** trains island women to provide support in the areas of counseling, prenatal care, health promotion and HIV/AIDS education. As clients (including children) move into their final life stages, they are introduced to the Palliative Care portion of the program in which the Home Visitor continues her/his visits and provides help with non drug pain relief, social issues of dying, future planning for family and personal care.

Community Education works to raise awareness and debunk myths surrounding HIV/AIDS. The 2000 individuals that have been tested by FS, have also received an average of 20 minutes of educational counseling at the time of testing. The Community Education program also includes awareness raising campaigns such as condom and information distribution in public places, poster blitzes and regular appearances on Bay Island radio and television stations. In addition, free seminars are provided to businesses, churches and schools by PLWAs and health promoters, in an effort to reduce stigma and facilitate increased acceptance and support for PLWAs in Honduran society.



CHANGE FOR CHILDREN ASSOCIATION (CFCA) is an Edmonton-based non-profit, non-governmental organization with a 30-year history of working for sustainable, grassroots community development in Latin America, Africa and the Philippines. Our development projects, their cost and priority, are determined by our Southern partners according to the needs of their communities. In Canada, our education program engages the public in a process of awareness raising, analysis and action on issues of global justice.

Change for Children provides financial support to our partner organization, Familias Saludables to addresses the problem of HIV/AIDS on the Bay Islands and its affect on the population. To do this, they employ four key strategies:

Education: By employing and training local Health Promoters and People Living with AIDS (PLWA) as Peer Counsellors, the project empowers members of the Bay Island communities to educate the public about HIV/AIDS and STD prevention and treatment, as well as provides information that shifts attitudes and reduces widely held stigma towards PLWA.

Prevention and Treatment for HIV/AIDS: By increasing access to HIV testing facilities, encouraging disclosure, and promoting and educating about safe sex practices and female controlled contraception the project seeks to decrease HIV infection on the Bay Islands and improve treatment PLWA receive.

Advocacy: Public awareness campaigns, advocacy by leading public figures, close relationships with elected officials and government representatives, human rights advocacy, and a campaign designed to educate employers about their responsibilities to PLWA seeks to reduce stigma and ensure PLWA's human rights are respected on the Bay Islands.

Build Capacity and networks: As a result of this project, Familias Saludables is increasing their ability and effectiveness as a leading Honduran NGO addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis. They have also built and participate in networks within Honduras, within Central America and internationally, fostering best practice dialogues. The project also provides members of the Bay Island communities with training, skills and gainful employment and has enhanced the capacity of the community as a whole to respond to the HIV/AIDS crisis they are facing.



Honduras - Facts at a Glance:

- Honduras is the second poorest country in the western hemisphere next to Haiti, with external debt accounting for eighty-two percent of its GDP.
- Social spending in Honduras on a per capita basis is the second lowest in the region behind Nicaragua and the third lowest in Latin America at US\$58 per person
- Two thirds of the population lives below the World Bank poverty line of \$2 US per day.
- Approximately one in four Hondurans earns less than \$1 a day.
- Chronic malnutrition affects 33% of children under five.
- The average Honduran citizen attends school for only 5.3 years.
- Honduras accounts for 50% of known HIV/AIDS infections in Central America, while its population is only about 17% of Central America's total population.



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