

Preventing HIV Among High-Risk Populations in Georgia

Background

As HIV has spread around the world during the past 20 years, Georgia has thus far been spared. Located in Eastern Europe, however, Georgia is part of a region that now has the world's fastest-growing HIV/AIDS epidemic. The fight against the HIV epidemic in Eastern Europe is being waged against a backdrop of socioeconomic turmoil. This instability fuels drug use and commercial sex, both of which increase the spread of HIV. The majority of new infections are among injection drug users. The example of the HIV epidemics in Russia and Ukraine illustrates how quickly HIV can spread among injection drug users (IDUs) and their contacts.

Information from a behavioral and biomarker survey in Georgia conducted in 2002 shows that HIV infections rates are low, but it is now clear that this situation will not continue unless there are radical reductions in risky behavior. Sex workers in Georgia have high rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), despite reported high condom use with paying clients. At the time of the survey, over three-quarters of IDUs in Georgia had shared injection equipment in the previous week. The Georgian government and local and international organizations have recognized the imminent threat and are investing in national prevention programs to ward off the epidemic before it grows.

The project

As a subgrantee to Save the Children, which is managing the STI and HIV Prevention (SHIP) Project, PATH is responsible for supporting the program's behavior change communication activities. PATH works closely as well with local partner groups, Tanadgoma and Bemoni Public Union, to implement this three-year project. The project received a two-year extension in April 2005.

The project goal is to reduce the rates of STI and HIV transmission in targeted urban locations in Georgia. To achieve this goal, SHIP has developed a cohesive and sustained response to prevent the further spread of STIs and HIV among populations engaging in risk behavior.

Project objectives

- To increase protective practices and decrease risk-associated practices among individuals at high risk for STIs and HIV.
- To improve quality, access, and use of key STI prevention and treatment services and HIV prevention services for high-risk groups.
- To improve STI and HIV surveillance and use of epidemiological data for use in planning and policy decisions.
- To strengthen capacity of local organizations to plan, finance, manage, and coordinate STI and HIV responses.

Project activities to date

Overall, the SHIP project has:

- Opened “Healthy Cabinet” clinics in two urban sites where vulnerable populations can receive free STI/voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) services.
- Developed the STI/HIV Prevention Task Force to strengthen coordination among local stakeholder groups working in HIV prevention.
- Carried out the country’s first behavior surveillance study with biomarkers.
- Supported local nongovernmental (NGOs) to develop extensive peer education approaches aimed at IDUs and sex workers in Tbilisi and the port city of Batumi.
- Applied the “positive deviance” methodology to identify and promote models of positive behavior already adopted among some female sex workers.

PATH’s specific contributions have been to:

- Conduct formative research among key populations in Tbilisi and Batumi.
- Train local partner agency staff in educational materials development, peer education, VCT, and behavior change communication and research methods.
- Provide technical assistance to evaluate peer education and outreach efforts among sex workers and IDUs.
- Organize a series of exchange visits between Georgian NGOs focused on HIV/STI prevention and similar NGOs based in Ukraine.

Local partners

Ministry of Health of Georgia; Bemoni Public Union; Tanadgoma; Infectious Diseases, AIDS and Clinical Immunology Research Center of Georgia; Georgian HIV/AIDS and Clinical Immunology Center; Tbilisi Institute of Narcology; Republican Center on Addiction, Adjara; Republican Center of Health Services for Mother and Child in Batumi; Association of Dermatovenerologists of Georgia; Ministry of Education of Georgia; Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia.

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