

# Thogomelo project

## Thogomelo project

Building South Africa's capacity to care for its community caregivers and protect vulnerable children

An estimated two million children across South Africa have lost one or both parents to AIDS. They face challenges that tower above their years: an absence of parental protection, the burden of loss and grief, and, increasingly, a heightened vulnerability to child abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Community members who assume the role of caring, supporting, and protecting these orphans and other vulnerable children often lack the skills and capacity to respond effectively. Nearly all face high stress levels, the potential for burnout, and a range of psychosocial needs.

In collaboration with South Africa's Department of Social Development, the US Agency for International Development's AIDSTAR program is supporting PATH, Health and Development Africa, and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance to work together as the Thogomelo project. Thogomelo aims to care for and protect vulnerable children by increasing the knowledge, abilities, and well-being of those who are responsible for them. With a dual focus on caregiver support and child protection, the project incorporates the best and most promising practices from Africa and is designed to become part of the enduring fabric of South Africa's child protection efforts.

### Strengthening the network of support

Primary caregivers face many challenges: older women may have age-related health concerns, siblings are often ill-equipped for the role of caregiving, and educated young adults seeking experience in auxiliary social work or health care may lack the skills to navigate complex family issues. Many caregivers are HIV positive themselves. At the same time, community caregivers—including individuals and organizations dedicated to child care, community health, community development, or faith-based assistance—may need to deepen their knowledge across a spectrum of issues, from HIV and AIDS treatment to the criminal justice system.

The Thogomelo project is developing resources and activities to support caregivers and help them overcome these challenges. All dimensions of caregiver wellness will be taken into account. To provide psychosocial support, the team is developing approaches to help caregivers reduce isolation and increase resilience. Thogomelo focuses on elements that will enable caregivers to feel more positively about their work—for example, activities that foster connection with peers and a culture of appreciation among colleagues.

To build skills and competence, the team is working with the Department of Social Development to develop a nationally accredited skills program and manual as well as an intervention toolkit. These materials are being introduced in a cascading skills training program for caregivers throughout South Africa (see sidebar). Using activity-based, participatory learning to engage a diverse

### PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

**Cascading training.** Over the five-year project period, the project's training materials will be used in a cascading program that will reach national master trainers, provincial trainers-of-trainers, and community caregivers at the district level, who will in turn train thousands of primary caregivers.

**Caregiver toolkit.** This comprehensive resource will include manuals, posters, and other materials that facilitate caregivers' work.

**Child protection resources.** A guidebook and CD-ROM will focus on early identification, treatment, care, and support of child abuse cases, with special attention on social and legal ramifications.

**Referral guide.** The project's referral guide will outline referral procedures and facilitate referrals of child protection violations.

range of caregivers, the project is providing guidance on a comprehensive set of topics, including strengthening relationships, self-care, dealing with stress, caring for caregivers, building a caring community, accessing and mobilizing resources, responding to child abuse and neglect, understanding child development, maintaining resilience, and increasing HIV and AIDS literacy.

### Providing the tools to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect

Throughout these activities, the Thogomelo team is strengthening community caregivers' capacity to identify and respond to violations in child protection—and, by doing so, reduce the anxiety service providers face when confronted with abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Because community ownership is essential to keeping children safe, Thogomelo is working closely with district and community stakeholders such as community care forums, community leaders, police officers, community health workers, and Department of Social Development officials.

Critical components of these efforts include a child protection guidebook, a CD-ROM outlining child protection policy, and a referral guide for community caregivers. These user-friendly resources will be incorporated into the caregiver trainings, capacity-building of child protection resource persons based in organizations, and an accredited child protection skills program for community caregivers and other service providers.

Together, these materials and activities are supporting the Department of Social Development's priorities for child protection, which include prevention of abuse through the identification of contributing factors, early intervention with affected families, and efficient management of abuse cases, including engagement with the legal and criminal justice system.

### Focusing on the long term

The Thogomelo project is built on three core principles that aim to foster local ownership and ensure the sustainability of these efforts:

- **Embed the project in existing structures.** By systematically linking with activities in the public sector and civil society, the project is building on current activities and helping to ensure sustainability.
- **Comprehensively address the needs of orphans and vulnerable children.** In addition to service provision, the project is addressing the critical areas of networking and advocacy to equip caregivers with the skills to address the needs of children at all levels.
- **Build on what works.** The project is incorporating state-of-the-art thinking into project implementation. For example, the nationally accredited caregiver training manual will complement national efforts while incorporating emerging and promising practices.

Together, these principles, activities, and resources are allowing communities to care for their caregivers, providing them with the psychosocial support and skills they need to perform their tasks well. The program is also supporting caregivers in promoting safe and healthy families—and, in turn, improving the well-being of the many children who depend upon them.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Caregivers from Bela Bela and Tzaneen shared their thoughts on the value of psychosocial support and the importance of training.

"I benefit from the support group sessions because everyone speaks their hearts out. It is encouraging to learn that you are not alone."

"Caregiver training gave me the knowledge to help and support others in taking care of themselves. Caregivers feel lonely and unsupported, but now I can help them share and express their feelings. When they feel accepted, they can live a healthier life."

"Training has helped me identify children with problems. I have learned how to talk with children and then help them."

"It is helpful to share my problems with others. It helps me feel okay."

#### About the team

The Thogomelo project is implemented by Health and Development Africa, which takes day-to-day leadership for project implementation and child protection; the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, which provides expertise in culturally relevant, low-literacy materials, particularly in the area of caregiver support; and PATH, which provides overall managerial and technical oversight as the prime contractor for the AIDSTAR consortium. Funding is made possible by the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

"Thogomelo" means "caring" or "taking care" in Venda, one of South Africa's 11 national languages.

Contact: [Thogomelo@hda.co.za](mailto:Thogomelo@hda.co.za)

February 2009

