

ON-LINE COUNSELLING SERVICES FOR THREE SCHOOL BASED TELECENTERS HAS BEEN LAUNCHED

An on-line counseling service was launched on May 29, 2003 for 3 School-Based Telecenter sites with training of teacher and student-peer counselors at Rider Hotel, Seeta Uganda. The main objectives of the workshop were to help young people appreciate Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health (ASRH) problems and how these problems relate to HIV/AIDS; acquire basic counseling skills to support their peers; develop basic ICTs skills required for on-line counseling; and also to develop action plans for the project. The On-line Counseling service was initiated jointly by SchoolNet Uganda/ICT for Education Program of the World Bank Institute and Straight Talk Foundation and is supported by Education Development Center Inc. (EDC) and Academy for Education Development (AED).

While Uganda has made impressive strides in the fight against HIV/AIDS, the overall rate of new infections and status of reproductive health remain among the young people. The Uganda AIDS Commission estimates that 1.1 million people living of the 22 million (now estimated at 23) in Uganda have HIV/AIDS. About 120,000 have developed AIDS. Notably nearly 80% of those infected with HIV are youths between the ages of 15-45 years, which also represents the most economically productive age group and often fenders of families. Adolescent girls between 15-19 years are particularly vulnerable, 4-6 times more than their male counterparts¹. Accordingly, Life expectancy has declined to an estimated 44 years. Studies have shown a reduction in agricultural productivity in some areas as a result of the epidemic. The epidemic has put further pressure on the already inadequate social sector services system². In 2000/2001 the percentage of females aged 15-24 with self-reported Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) symptoms was 27.2%, with 7.3% among males. It has also been indicated that between 21 –29% of girls dropping out of secondary school is associated with teenage pregnancy. This provides a firm justification and urgency for a service specifically targeting young people in ASRH and HIV/AIDS.

The Straight Talk Foundation <http://www.straight-talk.or.ug> has been disseminating information on Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health (ASRH) through newspaper publications, school visits for students' and Teachers' sensitizations and counseling, radio programs, networking as well as school club formation and support.

Recent studies have indicated that behavioural change is most effective when the individuals are directly targeted through face-to-face interactions. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), as observed by the Director General of Uganda AIDS Commission during the recent HIV/AIDS and ICT workshop in Uganda at Colline Hotel, is one of the best strategies for particularly the prevention activities.

This service is designed to take advantage of the already established School-Based Telecenter (SBT) network³ with 15 centers around the country. The SBTs <http://www.schooltelecentres.org> are equipped with computers and a fast Internet connection, which are accessible to students and outside communities. Taking advantage of the

¹The Uganda AIDS Commission http://www.aidsuganda.org/anylisis_2002.htm

² United Nations Development Program – Uganda www.undp.or.ug/hiv aids.htm

³ Uganda School-Based Telecenter are implemented by SchoolNet Uganda and supported by World Bank Institute – ICT for Education Program, World Links Organisation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Ministry of Education and Sports.

School Based Telecenters, students and youths-out-of school could now be reached by STF more easily through online counseling services on Adolescent and Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS.

In terms of Strategic focus, the project will work within 3 School Based Telecenters to conduct online guidance and counseling services to students in Ndejje Secondary School, Lango College and Duhaga SSS. It will directly benefit over 1,000 young people, the Uganda AIDS Commission and Ministry of Health during the initial 8 months' period. The activity is part of the broad follow-up to the HIV/AIDS and ICT workshop in Uganda at Colline Hotel, Kampala in September 2002.

The objectives of the on-line counseling project include; demonstrating the integration of ICTs in HIV/AIDS prevention and caring services; expand and diversify opportunities for access to Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health (ASRH) information and services for young people in and out-of-school; and promote the creation of HIV/AIDS Information and Educational Communication initiatives for and by the young people to enhance behavior change

During the launch workshop 18 participants underwent training in life skills planning, counseling service – basic qualities of a good counselor and using information and communication technologies as tools in counseling activities through www.nicenet.org “on-line classroom”. Officials also attended the workshop from the Uganda AIDS Control project. The Straight Talk Foundation and SchoolNet Uganda jointly conducted the 3-day training.

Workshop feedback:

*We are so appreciative for the on-line counseling [training] on Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH) and ICTs workshop ...and generally it's more than the usual concepts to us especially the adolescent teenagers... we will pass on the information fully to our peers. **Bonny Ocol – student Lango College SBT***

*I understood basic skills and I am ready to apply them to help fellow young people in my school to access on-line counseling. Thank you... **Zawedde Ruthie – student Ndejje Secondary SBT***

For more information and possibilities for partnerships, please contact Meddie Mayanja the ICT Community Development Specialist: mayanjameditie@yahoo.com