

GRANTEE PROFILES

COMMUNITY YOUTH MOBILISATION (CYM): ZAMBIA

Combining Recreation with Youth-Friendly HIV Education

Prevention, Treatment, and Advocacy for Rural Communities

Inside the simple, one-story youth center in rural Zambia, teens huddle over health education comic books or chat with friends. Outside, fast-moving games of soccer and tag are under way.

The small, tin-roofed building is one of eight youth resource centers run by Firelight grantee Community Youth Mobilisation (CYM) providing 45,000 rural youth recreational activities and a safe place to learn how to avoid contracting HIV/AIDS.

"We are loving it here," one teen told a visitor.

Youth are at the highest risk of becoming infected with HIV, and those living in rural areas have limited sources of health information, explains Abisheck Musonda, CYM's executive director.

The eight youth centers serve as community-based hubs for CYM's multi-faceted AIDS-intervention activities, which include HIV-prevention campaigns, volunteer peer educator training, youth policy advocacy, and promoting expanded access to antiretroviral drug treatment.

CYM was founded in 1995 "when Zambia's youth AIDS prevention programs were focused on urban areas, and rural communities were getting left behind without access to information," says Zanele Sibanda Knight, Firelight's programs director. Firelight began supporting CYM's HIV-prevention programs in 2006.

Recreational activities including basketball and drama draw youth to the centers where they find "a space where they can discuss issues of HIV and sexuality with openness; read information; and ask questions without fear of what others will say, or what their parents will say," says Sibanda Knight.

Along with youth-friendly education materials, CYM's eight youth centers provide counseling services, health care referrals, and community-wide awareness and educational events.

Each center has a local committee that offers program input. Some rural parents are wary of HIV/AIDS messages being relayed to their children, fearing that it will lead to sexual promiscuity, notes Musonda. To “build parents’ confidence and trust,” CYM includes local health officials in community events, he explains.

More than one thousand youth have taken CYM’s health tours, visiting hospitals and hospices to see firsthand the impact of HIV and drug abuse.

“The tours dispel some of the myths that abound regarding HIV/AIDS,” reflects Sibanda Knight. “The experience is designed to deepen their understanding of what they see all around them, helping youth overcome their fears, and begin to connect how their choices can help them avoid contracting the disease.”

“Youth Best at Reaching Youth”

Staffing CYM’s youth centers are 26 older youth who have gone through a year-long training and mentorship program with CYM’s seven staff members. They receive a stipend for their work.

Known as “community-based volunteers,” the trained youth provide ongoing services within their communities. They multiply their impact by training other local youth as peer leaders to assist.

These trainings also develop youth leadership in the communities, comments Sibanda Knight.

In addition to running the youth center programs, the volunteers make door-to-door visits to discuss HIV/AIDS and sexual health issues, reaching more than 3,000 people each year. Bicycles funded by Firelight Foundation help them bring HIV/AIDS information to households in more remote villages.

Youth are best at reaching other youth, Musonda insists—his perspective based on CYM’s experience.

The success of CYM’s volunteer peer educator model has attracted the attention of UNICEF’s Zambia office, which is introducing it in another part of the country. The University of Zambia’s Social Work Department places student researchers with CYM to document the model’s impact.

A recent survey suggests that CYM's programs are making a difference by contributing to behavior changes that can limit the spread of HIV/AIDS. Compared with other youth, the study found that CYM program participants delayed their first sexual experience by 18 months.

New Directions Build on Accomplishments

CYM has recently partnered with the Zambian government's health ministry to make HIV testing and counseling services available at four of the eight youth centers.

"It's a major accomplishment toward increasing access to youth-friendly health care services," says Sibanda Knight. "Youth are more likely to make use of these services in a space that they know, feel comfortable in, and have trusting relationships with people who can provide ongoing support if they test HIV-positive."

CYM is also encouraging parents with HIV-positive children to begin taking antiretroviral drugs, as well as helping facilitate their access to treatment. Now, more than 300 children ages 9 to 14 living with HIV participate in CYM's support groups that meet at the youth centers.

Concerns raised by CYM's community committees led to advocacy on youth health policy—another new direction for CYM. They organized a conference attended by high-level district policymakers on forced early marriages as well as alcohol and drug abuse among youth. At the conference, policymakers resolved to strengthen existing laws and formulate new policies. Zambia's newspapers, television, and radio covered the conference proceedings.

"CYM's young team is deeply engaged in the challenges affecting rural children and youth, and is well aware of effective strategies for reaching them," says Sibanda Knight. "In just five years, CYM is an established NGO in a position to mentor other organizations in proven ways of preventing HIV/AIDS among young people."