

THE GAMBIA

DHAPP

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE HIV/AIDS
PREVENTION PROGRAM

REDUCING THE INCIDENCE OF HIV/AIDS
AMONG UNIFORMED PERSONNEL IN
SELECTED AFRICAN NATIONS AND BEYOND

WINNING BATTLES IN THE WAR AGAINST HIV/AIDS

BACKGROUND

Country Statistics

The population of The Gambia is estimated to be 1.6 million, with an average life expectancy of 55.2 years. English is the official language; literacy is about 40.1%, disproportionately distributed between men and women. The Gambia is one of Africa's smallest countries and unlike many of neighbors, it has enjoyed long spells of stability since independence. Over 75% of the population depends on crops and livestock for its livelihood. The annual per capita income is estimated at \$1,800.

HIV/AIDS Statistics

The HIV/AIDS prevalence rate in the general population is estimated to be 1.2%, with an estimated 6800 people living with HIV/AIDS. Identified risk factors include high-risk heterosexual contact, and sexual contact with commercial sex workers. Prevalence is higher in rural than in urban areas. Women are more severely affected than men.

Military Statistics

The size of the armed forces is approximately 2000. Because The Gambia's military does not conduct forcewide testing, the overall prevalence rate for the military is unknown. However, HIV prevalence in the military is estimated at 2.1%, slightly higher than the HIV rate in the civilian population.

PROGRAM RESPONSE

Military-to-Military Technical Assistance

DHAPP staff provided technical assistance during an in-country assist to the recently implemented HIV/AIDS prevention program in the Gambian Armed Forces (GAF) in August 2005.

During this trip, DHAPP staff met with the Permanent Secretary of Defense and the GAF. DHAPP staff members were informed that peacekeeping training was conducted and well received by the troops. High information retention corresponded to this training as determined by a pre- and post-



test that was administered. Sensitization training began in July 2005 and was also well received by the troops.

The HIV/AIDS program coordinator from Senegal plans to make periodic trips to The Gambia to help them in the development of their HIV/AIDS program and provide assistance where possible.

Proposed Future Activities

A proposal was received on behalf of the GAF for the 2006 fiscal year. Some specific objectives of the proposed project include developing a train-the-trainer program for the military and their families, developing testing capability, strengthening infrastructure to provide surveillance statistics, and improving laboratory infrastructure.

OUTCOMES & IMPACT

Prevention

The GAF held its first HIV/AIDS prevention event in July 2005. The event was deemed a success with the training of 50 trainers, who have since carried out twelve training sessions in collaboration with DHAPP and the National AIDS Secretariat (NAS). Over the course of 12 sessions, 600 GAF personnel were reached with a comprehensive prevention message (465 men and 135 women). The GAF intends to reach each member of the military through training seminars within the next year. This means that over 2000



soldiers and their families will receive HIV/AIDS prevention education. This is deemed a considerable achievement in a country that has been historically silent on the issue of HIV transmission. Additionally, DHAPP has provided funds for the purchase of a TV and VCR so that films can be shown at training seminars and to prepare troops who are leaving on peacekeeping missions. Finally, the GAF supported 9 targeted condom service outlets for military members.

With regard to prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT), GAF medical services do not currently include antenatal care. Pregnant military women and spouses receive antenatal care through public clinics, which GAF subsidizes. GAF clinics are not currently staffed or equipped to be capable of handling deliveries or set up to provide PMTCT.

Care

All GAF clinics (9 outlets) provide basic palliative care to any military member or family member with HIV. However, all tuberculosis care is institutionalized at the national level and treated at 1 of 2 hospitals. The number of HIV-infected troops/families receiving HIV care is unknown at this time due to a lack of record-keeping.

Counseling and Testing

With NAS funding, the GAF recently completed the construction of a new counseling and testing center. The GAF is now preparing to train counselors and obtain equipment for the facility. They expect to be fully operational in FY06.

Other Activities

All HIV/AIDS prevention trainings include sessions devoted to reducing the stigma typically associated with HIV in The Gambia. As such, 600 military members were trained in the reduction of stigma and discrimination during FY05. People living with HIV/AIDS are invited to seminars to speak about their experiences and answer questions from participants. Additionally, all participants are encouraged to go out into their communities to engage people in discussions about HIV and act as resources to those who are interested in learning more. Participants are given ideas about how to answer questions, as well as where to direct people for further information.

