

WORKING FOR WATER MEETS THE CHALLENGE OF HIV/AIDS IN MPUMALANGA

Anyone driving through Nelspruit or White River may come across the “condom squad” in their bakkie with the words “Safe Sex Saves Lives” emblazoned on the back. This is a fond reference to the dedication of the *Working for Water* (WfW) team in Mpumalanga to the HIV/AIDS battle, and it is indicative of the tremendous impact they are having in the communities with which they work.



Members of the Working for Water “Condom Squad”

Toni Braack, who assists with the social outreach and HIV/AIDS education work in the programme, highlights the dire need for action and awareness around the issue: “A woman who recently went for an AIDS test was told she was negative. Not having been told, or understanding the difference between negative and positive, she was convinced she had AIDS”. Through a simple programme of Peer Education and training of workers, it is hoped that such misconceptions are cleared up.

There are more people in Africa living with HIV than ever before: 26 million adults and a further 1 million children. 90% of these carriers do not know that they are infected and are oblivious of their potential for passing it on to others. One in seven new

infections on the African continent in 1999 were believed to be in South Africa. In Mpumalanga, more than 150 new infections occur every day.

These statistics become even more frightening when one considers that of the millions, who are infected, there are many more that are affected (families, communities, people in the workplace). The social and economic ramifications of this are enormous. An example is when the breadwinner dies of a disease and the only source of income is lost (school fees, clothes etc), leaving single mothers and orphans in the community.

The WfW programme is under no illusions. Of the 20 000 workers employed in the programme, it is likely that a great number of them will be infected. The implications for productivity, household income and family life cannot be overlooked.

Working for Water has committed more than R1million to AIDS education and training. The programme has adopted an interventionist stance in the fight against HIV/AIDS and makes every effort to support community based HIV/AIDS initiatives together with the Department of Health. It is imperative that the programme establishes working partnerships with other HIV/AIDS service providers, and as such, has strong links with NGOs and service providers.

The programme is committed to the integration of HIV/AIDS into the everyday activities of the programme (through literacy, First Aid) with a workplace and a community focus. HIV/AIDS education should be ongoing, and not seen as a once-off process. A peer education approach has been adopted, where individuals are selected for their capacity to encourage HIV positive persons to participate in the programme, as well as a willingness to interact and work with HIV positive and negative persons regarding the issues of HIV/AIDS.

Last year, twenty-four people from the Pilot HIV/AIDS WfW project in Mpumalanga participated in a Peer

Education AIDS workshop run by On-Que, HIV/AIDS and development consultants. The results of a subsequent were encouraging. After the training, each trainer had reached an average of 56 people, either in the workplace or in their communities.

Tony Poulter, Regional Leader for WfW, enthuses "One of the most encouraging things for me was hearing that the peer educators have all made their own wooden dildos to demonstrate condom use!" This, and the fact that they have requested special AIDS T-shirts demonstrates the acceptance of the peer education approach in the communities.

All administration and area managers have been on an AIDS Legal Network Course. It is considered imperative, in any workplace context, that management should have a clear commitment to the strategy, and that employees see this commitment as not only sincere, but vital for the fight against the spread of the epidemic.

Creative, non-threatening approaches to AIDS awareness are adopted by the programme, with drama, song and poetry competitions and exhibitions. Working for Water projects are encouraged to link with their activities with World AIDS Day and Condom week.

In Mpumalanga, it was decided to implement a competition to promote awareness. The first round was held in Barberton at the Correctional Services centre and guests were invited from community radio stations, NICRO, ATTIC and various departments. There were about 280 participants and 400 supporters. 1000 people attended another competition held in Bushbuckridge with 1000 people attending the event.

Some of the concerns raised by workers are related to avoiding infection, whether those living with AIDS will be treated fairly, concern about confidentiality, issues around safety in the field (where chainsaws and slashers pose an inevitable risk), protection from discrimination, employee benefits and protection from promotion and training benefits. The WfW prevention programme incorporates awareness, education programmes, condom distribution, and STD management. WfW is all too aware that

condom distribution programmes will fail if not accompanied by raising awareness and using education to change attitudes towards sexual practice. The development of skills and confidence in people is critical in creating an enabling environment and allowing them to protect themselves.

There is no doubt that the WfW team in Mpumalanga is providing a much-needed service to communities living with the threat of HIV/AIDS infection. The team facilitates access to counselling and support services for community based care networks with peer educators acting as catalysts at community level.

The teams have been called on to assist parents who have expressed that they are inhibited when speaking to their children about sexually transmitted diseases. It is also positive to note that most if not all the women reached by the Mpumalanga team are extremely keen and open to the use of contraception, with the female condom proving the most popular. (Sadly, the cost of these is still too high for distribution).

With the success of the Mpumalanga pilot, the next WfW HIV/AIDS project will be initiated in Kwazulu-Natal, with other regions following suit.