

AIDS info dissemination expands in Swaziland

with James Hall

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SAfAIDS has come to town. Actually, the Southern Africa HIV and AIDS Information Dissemination Service has been a presence in Swaziland for some years.

Since 2003, the regional non-profit organisation based in Pretoria has sponsored this column. It has been involved with local partners in the health sector on strategies and partners, and its most noticeable presence can be found at the AIDS Information library run by NERCHA in Manzini.

Today, SAfAIDS formally opens its Swaziland office, also in Manzini (on Esser Street), adding this country to Zambia and Zimbabwe where the organisation already has country offices.

partners

“We have been coming to Swaziland to meet with our partners, but we felt we wanted an on the ground presence here,” said SAfAIDS Deputy Director Sara Page.

“Our partners said they don’t see enough of us,” said Page, who noted that the accessibility offered by a Swaziland office will make it easier for Swaziland’s health organisations to access information and advice. Information dissemination is what SAfAIDS, which was established in 1994, is all about. The collection of information about AIDS, the production of this information in various formats, and the distribution of the resulting info – in the form of pamphlets, brochures, books, videos, radio scripts, live performances and Internet – has gone far to spread widely helpful, fact-based and life-saving information and to counter harmful myths and rumors that regularly adhere to this deadly disease.

responses

To quote its mission statement: “The organisation’s mission is to promote effective and ethical development responses to the epidemic and its impact through HIV and AIDS knowledge management, capacity development, advocacy, policy analysis and documentation.”

In addition to Swaziland, Zambia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, SAfAIDS implements programmes in Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Namibia.

One form of information dissemination has nothing to do with the media, but is familiar to the Swazi way of life. SAfAIDS promotes dialogue at the community and national levels about AIDS information, and also amongst peer groups, whether they are youth, elders, men and women exclusively, traditional and religious authorities, and others.

“We work with organisations at the national level, like the ministry of health, SWANEPHA and NERCHA, and on the regional level, like the Shiselweni Reform Church, with whom we were doing a literacy project,” said Maserame Mojapele, SAfAIDS Country Representative for Swaziland.

volunteers

With the Shiselweni church group, SAfAIDS trained trainers whom in turn trained volunteers to inform the public about antiretroviral drug treatment (ART) available to both children and adults.

Manzini’s AIDS Library is an example of the working relationship SAfAIDS has had with local partners, in this case NERCHA.

“We opened the Information Centre together in 2005. NERCHA runs the library and we provide the materials: computers, pamphlets, books, videos, leaflets, posters and other items,” said Mojapele.

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“We use a ‘cascading’ model to train trainers who then go out and train others. Since SAfAIDS is not an implementer we train regional trainers who are representatives from partner organisations on one of our programmes, in Pretoria. National trainers train community based volunteers who then dissemination through community dialogues and meetings,” said Mojapele.

literate

Qualification for trainers is these: the person must be literate (be able to read and write), speak the English language, and already be a trainer in his or her organisation.

“Our researchers and HIV activists, and indeed our own experiences, have recently been indicating that our cultures are failing to keep up with our changing world,” notes Leigh Price who was involved in the programme.

The “Changing the Rivers Flow Programme” was one of their most successful, in which gender dynamics (the roles women play in societies and homes) in a cultural context affects the spread of HIV.

“For that particular project we were using a ‘cultural dialogue model.” Men spoke amongst themselves, as did women and what we call custodians of culture – elders, traditional leaders, chiefs, and politicians. The men’s group, for instance, discussed ways to protect themselves and their families from contracting HIV. The custodians of culture discussed cultural practices that put communities at risk.

Getting the people involved in solution finding endows individuals with a sense of control over the daunting AIDS situation as they confront head-on the disease that amongst many Swazis is something they dare not name.

Youth groups were formed when sexually active minors said they were inhibited discussing sexual matters in front of parents and adults.

prominently

One of the SAfAIDS partners who will figure prominently in today’s launch of the organisation’s Swaziland office is SWANEPHA (Swaziland Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS), the umbrella organisation for AIDS support groups.

As SAfAIDS acknowledges in its literature, “This is an acknowledgement of the fact that people living with HIV and AIDS are an important stakeholder and partner in responding to the epidemic.

Therefore, PLHIV should be given opportunities to contribute not just as beneficiaries but as equal partners that can participate meaningfully in the design and implementation of HIV and AIDS responses.”

Another goal to be facilitated by SAfAIDS’ new presence in Swaziland is to assist the country with the implementation of the Maputo Plan of Action and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.

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