

What young people are saying about...

The Summit on Young People on HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean

“Governments should help create places where young people feel safe to access care including HIV/AIDS and STD testing”

On 17 March 2004, the youth facilitators of the Summit on Young People on HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean held in Barbados from 21 – 23 March came together in the Voices of Youth chat room to give feedback on the Summit Declaration, talk logistics and get to know one another.

Youth facilitators came from Barbados, Trinidad and Jamaica and represented local youth non governmental organizations actively promoting sexual and reproductive health including HIV awareness in their communities.

OVERVIEW

Youth moderators used the chat as an opportunity to explore HIV-related issues within the particular context of the Caribbean. Participants placed emphasis on the need for a holistic approach to HIV programming that takes into consideration society and culture and familial relationships. A great concern was also follow-up to the Summit, including actual implementation of the Declaration and buy-in by the Caribbean Governments.

In terms of HIV policies and programming, youth facilitators gave particular attention to the following issues:

- ? parental consent for HIV testing
- ? the role of the family, and in particular parent-child relations
- ? voluntary confidential counselling and treatment
- ? alternatives to needles for HIV-testing
- ? stigma and discrimination
- ? services for the hearing and visually impaired

Following is a brief summary of the points raised in the pre-Summit chat. Post-Summit chats will follow.

HIV Testing

Questions around HIV testing dominated much of the discussion.

*“we need to help to create that comfortable environment” (Jamaica)
“...help build trust” (Trinidad)
“...encourage communication amongst the family” (Barbados)*

Parental consent: Whether or not parental consent should be required for testing presented a particular conundrum. Participants were concerned that youth may not be able to “handle the results of a test, especially if positive” (Barbados), and so would benefit from their parents support and guidance.

However, it was suggested that parental consent can deter young people from getting tested, particularly in the Caribbean context where “parents don’t even know their kids are sexually active” and “don’t spend time with their children so it becomes hard to even go to the parents.” (Trinidad)

Participants suggested that the focus should be on creating an “atmosphere where they [youth] can feel comfortable then they will be encouraged to check themselves.” (Trinidad). It was also suggested that pre- and post-test counselling be made mandatory so that youth who do not have strong parental ties can still benefit from support services.

Swab vs. needles: Another point raised was the need for alternative testing options to needles, such as “testing saliva through swabs in the mouth to help persons who have a fear of needles.” (Trinidad)

Stigma and discrimination

Participants talked of the lack of explicit policies in their countries protecting young people from stigma and discrimination. They asked for this gap in policy to be addressed both at the Summit and in the declaration

“...the declaration is good but without the support of government and advocating this is not a reality” (Barbados)

Hearing and visually impaired

Ensuring facilities are available for young people who are hearing and visually impaired was also a prominent concern. Participants from Trinidad asked for “sensitive materials catered for these people with special needs” to be provided both during the Summit and in all HIV services.

A similar need for special consideration of young people in correctional institutions was also raised.

Implementation

Effective implementation of the Declaration was of particular concern. Youth Facilitators sought language for the declaration that would ensure governments took responsibility for the recommendations set out and their implementation. They agreed that without government support and advocacy, the Declaration was just words with little to no impact.

“we need to make sure that young people feel that they have good mechanisms to support them in acting on the declaration” (Aziza, Facilitator)

A related concern was ensuring that young people had the support of the government to make the Declaration a reality, including setting up their own HIV programmes in schools and spreading the word about HIV and AIDS.

Post-summit action: Watch-dog group

In addition to already stated concerns around implementation, both in terms of the government and young people’s roles, it was suggested that a Caribbean country watch dog group be established to monitor progress after the Summit and ensure that the outcome document is put into action.

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