

Celebrating and Learning from Five Years of Global HIV/AIDS Workplace Programming

Opening Remarks By Deputy Undersecretary James Carter
September 27, 2006

Good afternoon. I'd like to welcome you today to the five year anniversary celebration of the Academy of Educational Development's SMARTWORK program. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Matthew Roberts, Michael Kaplan and Frank Beadle de Palomo for their hard work and dedication to the development and implementation of this program and for making today's celebratory event possible.



It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you to share stories, strategies and insights from the US Department of Labor and the Academy for Educational Development, that have come from five years of working on HIV/AIDS workplace education programs throughout the globe.

DOL and AED have traveled an interesting road together. It has not always been an easy road. As you are all aware, international development projects present many challenges: from the problematic political will of the host country, to uncertain travel conditions, to the obstacles in reaching the target population; SMARTWORK endeavored to overcome these challenges – and after five productive years – we are able to share with you the successes and lessons learned along the way.

At this time, I would also like to give a warm welcome and many thanks to Patrick Burke, Gesse (Jessie) Aubry, Abiodun Adetoro, (Ah-Bee-O-Don Ah-duh-Toro), and Natalya Lukyanova, (Natalia Loo-Key-Ah-No-Va), our country coordinators, for their dedication in the field. They were out there where the rubber meets the road. They are the ones that made these projects happen.

Patrick, Gesse, Abiodun, Natalya, we look forward to hearing about your experiences in Vietnam, Haiti, Nigeria and the Ukraine – your efforts to cajole, convince, and collaborate with the stakeholders, in order to:

- Engage employers who did not see HIV/AIDS as an issue and bring them into the program,
- Educate unions so that they, in turn, can share key information with their members and negotiate HIV/AIDS issues as part of their union contracts,
- Raise awareness for Ministries of Labor and encourage them to incorporate HIV/AIDS workplace education and policy development at the national level.
- And most importantly, work directly with the workers so they know how to prevent HIV/AIDS infections, and how to treat those with HIV/AIDS as equals, with respect and compassion.

As you know, the statistics on HIV/AIDS are sobering: over 40 million people are living with HIV/AIDS in the world. 13,000 new HIV infections occur every day.

Most people infected are working in some way, shape or form. The International Labor Organization estimates that as many as 36.5 million people who are engaged in productive activity are infected with HIV.

In addition to being an almost overwhelming human tragedy, HIV/AIDS has a profound economic impact on countries in transition. The HIV/AIDS pandemic threatens to cripple, and in some cases reverse the gains in economic development in many countries. HIV/AIDS causes the loss of skilled workers, decreased productivity, and ultimately fewer wage earners which increase the number of vulnerable families – particularly young adults and children.

In 2004, an ILO Report stated that a World Economic Forum survey of 1,620 companies across Africa, found that 89% were concerned about the impact of HIV/AIDS, and 60%, or 972 companies, saw in the future significant adverse effects, including a reduced level of productivity.

A 2005 UNAIDS and World Health Organization study stated that the size of the labor force in 32 African countries will decrease by 5 to 35 percent by 2020 because of this pandemic. The global labor force has lost more than 28 million people as a result of AIDS; without further intervention this number could grow to 74 million by 2015.

Imagine, if this conference hall housed a business, and we were the employees, in some countries up to one third of the workforce could be infected by HIV or AIDS by 2020. Look around the table - up to one in three.

In 2001, Congress saw the need to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic through a global workplace program and provided the US Labor Department's Bureau of International Labor Affairs, with 10 million dollars to develop an effective response to HIV/AIDS, focusing on prevention education targeting employers and workers.

The Academy for Educational Development won the competitive bid, and began working with the Labor Department to develop its workplace program. Project design missions were conducted, stakeholders engaged, and work plans were submitted. Strategic Frameworks were developed, and re-developed, monitoring plans outlined and indicators defined. Slowly the projects began to take shape. AED christened the "SMARTWORK" program, - and the "SMART" part stands for "Strategically Managing AIDS Responses Together." This acronym truly captures the spirit of the program.

The program aimed to reduce the transmission of HIV infections among workers and their families. The task required recognition that the greatest enemies in the battle against HIV and AIDS are ignorance, fear and discrimination. The culture of silence and denial reinforces ignorance about HIV/AIDS, which in turn fuels the fear that generates stigma and discrimination. Within the context of the workplace, it is critical to establish an educated and supportive environment to reduce stigma and discrimination and encourage a productive and healthy social dialogue.

I believe that our experience shows that this is a critical first step. With an enabling environment, free of discrimination, with key information provided about HIV/AIDS, workers and employers

can lay the groundwork to achieve additional goals, such as increased counseling and testing, information on care and support, and access to treatment.

There are many advantages to workplace programs; since workers spend a majority of their waking hours at their jobs, the workplace is an ideal forum in which to conduct necessary educational sessions that can help protect them with accurate information. Workers are a captive audience and the worksite provides a tremendous opportunity for important, life saving messages to be conveyed.

But education itself is not enough. We have learned that unless you also address stigma and discrimination and give people hope for a longer productive life, there is no incentive for people to confront their possible HIV status, to openly share their problems, or to provide support and compassion to friends, family and co workers who are infected or affected by HIV and AIDS – or even to take care of their own illness. From accurate knowledge about the virus comes freedom from fear about HIV/AIDS.

Since we began with AED, the Department of Labor has received additional appropriations of 10 million dollars each in fiscal years 2002, 2003, and 2004, to further develop our workplace programs. We have worked with Family Health International, Project Hope, the Futures Group, World Vision, and the International Labor Organization to develop and implement workplace programs in over 23 countries.

We have been able to make headway, and we have done so using a tripartite approach. No one actor was alone, no one actor was sufficient. One of the most important elements of the Department of Labor's contribution to this fight is the concept of partnership: a partnership among government, workers and employers coming together to build a better future. It is critical to recognize that, while the relationship among these three groups is sometimes an adversarial one, there are also common bonds. In dealing with problems like HIV/AIDS, the future of each group depends on one another. By strengthening the ties of partnership, the tripartite partners, workers, employers and government, are empowered to accomplish much more than would have been possible by each group acting alone.

This afternoon, we will hear examples demonstrating that workplace programs are a critical element, and a positive contribution in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Our data indicate that workers at the beginning of the program had a low level of knowledge about HIV/AIDS and strong discriminatory stigmatizing attitudes towards people living with HIV/AIDS. The post-program survey demonstrates that attitudes have changed, and that in the workplaces where SMARTWork has provided training, discrimination has diminished. We applaud this outcome.

I would like to conclude by praising all of you for recognizing the need for government, business, and labor to work together to address the HIV/AIDS crisis. An excellent effort has been made, but there is still an enormous amount of work that needs to be done. We hope we will be able to continue to ensure that prevention education and the development of appropriate workplace policies are fully implemented with measurable achievements – in other words, a response that makes a difference in people's lives!

This is best illustrated by the comments of a project participant who stated, “Now infected workers receive assistance and are treated like a man or woman who caught an illness like other ones. Some people used to refuse to take the detection test, but now they accept... Now infected workers receive care and keep on working.”

Thank you again to all those who have helped make these five years possible. Now let's get ready for an interesting and fruitful afternoon.