

Wegen AIDS Talkline - 952

Hotline/Talkline as a BCC intervention

Hotlines or Talklines are telephone lines set up to receive calls from people seeking information on a variety of sensitive topics such as rape, drug use, suicide, sexual health and in recent years HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS talklines have been an integral part of the fight against the HIV pandemic in developed countries from as early as the 1980s and continue to play a crucial role in sharing information widely in a confidential way. The strict confidentiality/anonymity combined with a nonjudgmental and unbiased service allows callers to speak freely about sensitive and private feelings without embarrassment. In addition, the interpersonal and in-depth communication afforded by talklines further enhances its capacity for behavior change. Talklines play a central role in disseminating up-to-date and accurate information, offering support and counseling, referring clients to appropriate services, and providing feedback data to government and other agencies as a way of tracking trends, addressing misconceptions, and measuring the impact of communication campaigns. Hence, talklines are excellent behavior change communication tools and can be used to strengthen existing BCC strategies.

Recognizing the vital role talklines play in bringing about behavioral change, a considerable number of developing countries have adapted this innovation. Talklines serve South Africa, Nigeria, Mozambique, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, Zambia, Guatemala, Trinidad and Tobago, the Philippines, India and others in their fight against the HIV pandemic. All these countries have reported a significant enhancement of their HIV/AIDS efforts.

HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia-Magnitude of the Problem

Ethiopia is one of the hardest hit sub-Saharan African countries by the HIV pandemic. Currently, there are about 1.5 million out of approximately 69 million Ethiopians who are infected with HIV, 54.5% of which are women and 96,000 are children under the age of 15. Ethiopia's Ministry of Health (MoH) statistics estimates the HIV prevalence at 4.4% with the highest percentage among the ages of 15-49. The urban and rural areas HIV prevalence rates are 12.6% and 2.6% respectively. In 2003, an estimated 114,690 Ethiopians died of AIDS, escalating the number of children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS to over half a million. In 2003, it is estimated AIDS will reduce the life expectancy at birth of Ethiopians by 4.6 years, increase infant mortality and adult death rates, and lower the population size and growth in Ethiopia.

Although basic awareness of HIV/AIDS is high in Ethiopia, it is still far from being a subject of discussion in families, communities, social organizations and workplaces. Inadequate access to accurate and up-to date information is fostering secrecy about the disease contributing to high levels of stigma and discrimination which consequently perpetuates the spread of the virus. Most individuals have insufficient knowledge about accessing basic service such HIV testing, on-going psychological/psychosocial support, and care and treatment options. The minority that know of these services are reluctant to access them for fear of being stigmatized by family and friends. Ensuring that this information is readily available to the general public is pivotal for the success of the fight against HIV/AIDS currently underway in the country.

A national HIV/AIDS talkline in Ethiopia is an excellent means of availing up-to-date and accurate information. Enhancing the populations' knowledge base will in turn reduce the

existing fear and secrecy surrounding the disease consequently opening up dialogue within families, communities, social organizations and the workplace. In addition the talkline can be an alternative source of confidential and anonymous counseling and support for those infected and affected by the disease. With new initiatives such as the President's Emergency Plan and Global Funds for HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis, which are expected to provide anti-retroviral therapy (ART) to the greater population, it is essential to have an information source which guides individuals through the intricacies of accessing as well as utilizing the complex drug therapies and the method used for prevention from mother to child transmission (PMTCT). This kind of resource can complement the information patients receive from their doctors and encourage adherence while providing counseling support for those who need it. Furthermore, the novelty of these programs requires a central information center that can be easily accessed by clients for referrals to appropriate services.

Talklines can also reach out to hard-to-reach groups such as out of school & in school youth, women, adults and sex workers, since easy access and anonymity allow people to freely discuss their issues with professional counselors and gain access to information that may be embarrassing to talk about face to face. Additionally, a talkline can dispel myths and misconceptions around HIV. Thus a talkline can play pivotal role in preventing the spread of the virus and mitigating the impact of the epidemic on the individual, family, community and the country.

Purpose of Wegen AIDS Talkline

Individuals can call Wegen AIDS Talkline at - 952 to access free and anonymous HIV/AIDS information, counseling and referrals. Dissemination of information through the talkline will equip individuals with the necessary knowledge to protect themselves from HIV, practice positive living if already HIV positive, encourage greater uptake of VCT, and support Ethiopians in accessing and adhering to antiretroviral therapy. The referral component will enable individuals to maneuver through the complex network of HIV/AIDS service providers and access the necessary information, care and support services they need. By providing on-going counseling services, the talkline will create an enabling environment for those infected and affected by the virus to come to terms with it, manage undue stress, find ongoing support through referrals, and realize their overall emotional well being. By providing information related to HIV and AIDS through an anonymous and confidential channel, the talkline hopes to encourage greater dialogue and reduce stigma and discrimination while encouraging greater acceptance of PLHAs.

Goal and Objective of Wegen AIDS Talkline

With the aforementioned purpose of the talkline in mind the overall goal of the talkline will be to:

- Empower Ethiopians to know their HIV status and for those who are HIV negative to protect themselves from contracting HIV.
- Promote healthy positive living among those infected and affected by the disease.

The specific objective of the talkline is to:

- Provide up-to-date information on:
 1. 1. HIV/AIDS, including VCT, PMTCT, ART, Care & Support
 2. 2. Sexually Transmitted Infections
 3. 3. Opportunistic Infections
- Provide quality telephone counseling
- Refer callers to appropriate services across the country
- Track and disseminate collected data
- Reach youth, people living with HIV, their families, and the general public at large

Geographic coverage & Expansion Plan

Wegen AIDS talkline service is a national toll free line centrally located in Addis Ababa but accessible to all regions through partnerships with ETC and HAPCO.

Languages

Due to the diversity of ethnic groups in Ethiopia, it is essential that the talkline provide services in the three major languages: Amharic, Oromifa, and Tigrigna. Every effort will be made to ensure that all three languages are available but will be dependent on the availability of multilingual counselors at any given time of operation.

Hours of operation

Initially, the talkline's hours of operation will be from 8:00am - 8:00pm Monday through Saturday to reach people when they are most likely to call. Once the talkline becomes operational throughout the regions, these hours of operation will be adjusted to reflect caller's needs.

Hotline Telephone System Overview

The hotline currently has eight dedicated lines to serve the public. All counselors are hooked to the hotline by means of a PABX and a telephone set fitted with headset. The PABX is selected to support a typical call center with features including:

- Automatic Call Distribution (ACD)
- Real time calls/agents monitoring
- Keeps call records and reports call statistics and other features

Information is recorded on two separate databases. First, all incoming call statistics (number of calls each agents/coordinators answers, calls duration, etc) are recorded by the PABX/ACD computer. Callers ID are not recorded. The second database is filled by each counselor using an intranet web page back-ended on an MS SQL server. This database records specific information about each call counseling.

The counselors obtain information from three sources

- Compiled electronic information from the intranet database
- Hard copy reference
- Internet web access

Staff Recruitment & Training of Hotline Counselors

The success of a hotline depends largely on the people managing and servicing it. Hotline counselors should provide up-to-date information, quality telephone counseling, and referrals to appropriate services. The ARC has therefore recruited five full-time paid

counselors expected to work 40 hours a week and 16 volunteer counselors for provision of services. All talkline staff has received training on basic and talkline counseling techniques and an additional on the job training prior to providing services to callers. In addition, a Hotline Coordinator, and one Senior Counselors manage and provide supportive supervision to the counselors.

Constraints/Challenges

The following have been identified as major constraints while establishing the HIV/AIDS talkline and rendering the service:

- o ETC may lack the appropriate level of technology to provide consistent and quality service through its phone lines; technical problems may be an issue
- o Difficulty in determining call volume and ensuring adequate coverage is available at all times.
- o Potential lack of resources for ongoing promotional activities as well as day-to-day operation of the talkline
- o Potential for high turnover of talkline counselors and drop out of volunteers
- o Lack of up-to-date referral sites

Conclusion & Way Forward

As experience has shown in many countries, talklines are an important BCC strategy to bring attitude and behavioral change to reduce the prevalence of HIV and its psychological, social and economic impact. Since the talkline is anonymous, it offers an important service in providing information, counseling and referrals in a nonjudgmental way making it easier for callers to discuss sensitive topics related to HIV without fear of rejection. The ARC talkline will also serve as an excellent tracking system through its data collection in learning about how people are understanding and interpreting the many HIV prevention messages they receive. The ARC is well placed to launch the HIV talkline given its rich set of resources and experience in providing HIV-related information to scores of Ethiopians.