



SUCCESS STORY

Preventing AIDS on the Streets of Cairo

Rehabilitated drug addicts reach out to high-risk groups



Photo: FHI/Doaa Oraby

Outreach workers with USAID staff at the Freedom Program's center in Shoubra, Cairo.

"I consider the Freedom outreach workers as more than family, they are everything to me," says Said. In coordination with the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, USAID is developing HIV/AIDS prevention programs to help former drug users like Said get back on track and begin a new life.

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Each new day is a blessing for Said. He is freed from the scourge of drug addiction and safe in the knowledge he is no longer at risk from HIV/AIDS. He no longer steals to feed his addiction, and his friends and family have welcomed him back into their lives.

The life he now leads is a stark contrast to what it was one year ago. Sacrificing everything, Said had sold his shop, split with his fiancée, and even sold his clothes to get drugs. He risked contracting HIV by sharing needles with other drug users. The turning point came when his cousin told him about the Freedom outreach center in Shoubra, Cairo. Although he had tried to quit before and was skeptical, all of the counselors he spoke to were former drug users and fully understood his doubts and anxiety. They persuaded Said to go to the Freedom Program's drug rehabilitation clinic. He graduated after six months.

To reach high-risk individuals like Said and prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in Egypt, USAID is working with Egypt's National AIDS Program and Family Health International to build the Freedom Program's capacity to provide outreach services to intravenous drug users. Freedom outreach staff target users and offer street-based and drop-in counseling, and provide risk reduction and peer education and, in some cases, medical and nutrition support.

Since its launch in July 2003, Freedom has reached more than 900 intravenous drug users on the streets, while about 625 users have visited the outreach center. Freedom also refers patients to voluntary and confidential counseling and testing services. Previously, positive HIV results, including names of individuals, were reported to the Ministry of Health, enhancing stigma and discrimination associated with HIV. Now, those being tested no longer have to worry.

As someone whose life changed thanks to the Freedom Program, Said will never forget the support and encouragement he received. He is grateful for the second chance he now has in life. He has earned back his self-respect, as well as the respect of others. Said still visits the Freedom center from time to time, spending time counseling anyone dropping in who might be at risk of contracting HIV. After all, he knows what they are going through and is keen to help others have a second chance.