



FIRST PERSON Reaching the Deaf About HIV/AIDS

Bringing information about HIV/AIDS to deaf Tanzanians



Malise Swila, interpreter and teacher for the deaf in Kibaha, Tanzania.

“Now we can educate deaf people about preventing infections and the importance of counseling and testing,” said Malise Swila, interpreter and HIV/AIDS counselor for the deaf.

Telling Our Story
U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523-1000
<http://stories.usaid.gov>

Malise’s hands move with rapid determination and grace as she explains the importance of educating others about the dangers of HIV/AIDS. A 39-year-old interpreter, teacher and mother of three, Malise is also deaf. At the age of five, she lost her hearing as a result of complications from malaria.

Using Kiswahili-based sign language and with the assistance of a signing, English-speaking interpreter, Malise described her participation in a 4-week Voluntary, Counseling and Testing course organized with support from USAID in collaboration with the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. The course has trained leaders and teachers within deaf communities to use sign language to carry out counseling services, thereby overcoming a major barrier to communication among the deaf. The course is the first of its kind in Tanzania.

Malise and 16 other leaders from the deaf community will use their new skills and credentials as certified HIV/AIDS Counselors to work throughout the country and with members of the Tanzanian Association of the Deaf to ensure that deaf people get tested, know their status, and live healthy lives.

There is no official census but estimates suggest there are more than 500,000 deaf Tanzanians. Most are poor, and relatively few deaf people can attend formal schools, making access to information a serious challenge. In Tanzania, only one weekly television news summary is aired for the hard of hearing. According to Malise, without a trained, signing professional, there are too many obstacles for a deaf person worried about or suffering from HIV/AIDS to seek help.

Asked about the impact of stigma among the deaf, Malise’s broad smile narrowed: “If you’re a deaf person with AIDS, you get a double stigma.” Malise is confident as she describes how she and her peers will use their new skills to make an impact in their communities. “Being able to talk to a deaf person about these issues can be much easier than talking to a hearing person,” she said. “That’s why it’s such an opportunity to have learned how to counsel and gain the trust of others.”

Photo: USAID/Kim Wylie