



U.S. Agency for International Development

Bureau for Global Health

SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

Youth Centers in Central Asia Empower Youth, Prevent Drug Use and HIV Infection

IN CENTRAL ASIA, most new cases of HIV are the result of injecting drug use. Young people living along the main drug trafficking routes are at high risk of becoming injecting drug users and suffering from related problems such as addiction, overdose, and HIV infection.

To counteract this risk, Population Services International (PSI) works as a key partner of the Alliance for Open Society International in the implementation of the Drug Demand Reduction Program. Through its Central Asia Regional program, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds this five-year program, which supports a network of youth centers whose focus is to prevent substance abuse. By working with young people before they get involved with drug use, centers in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan—three of the main points along the drug route—are making a difference. The youth centers offer information, education, and activities to help young people make healthy choices about sex and drug use.

Most new injecting drug users do so because of peer pressure. So the centers target young people who have friends or family members who already use injecting drugs, as well as “troubled” youth—school drop-outs, youth from broken homes, young offenders, and youth with psychological problems—who live in communities where drugs are easily found and where drug users congregate.

A key to the program’s success is peer education. The peer educators have all been touched in some way by heroin: many are siblings, children, or friends of current or former heroin users. They understand the realities of drug use and have seen it up close. “Because of their experience and direct knowledge of the realities of drug use, our peer educators are perceived as credible sources of information and peer group support,” said Robert Gray, PSI senior program manager in the Drug Demand Reduction Program.

Dilnoza is a 22-year-old psychology student who lives in a neighborhood where heroin is common. She became a peer educator at the youth center in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, because her own brother had had a long bout with heroin addiction. Knowing first-hand how destructive the drug culture could be for young people, she wanted “... not only to help people already using drugs, but also their friends who are not yet using.”

“Because of their experience and direct knowledge of the realities of drug use, our peer educators are perceived as credible sources of information and peer group support.”
—Robert Gray
Senior Program Manager
PSI Drug Demand Reduction Program



Photo courtesy of Population Services International

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC
20523-3600

www.usaid.gov

The program involves the target group of at-risk youth at every stage of program design, including message and material development. In addition to providing peer education and access to reliable information on drugs, addiction, and HIV/AIDS, the centers help vulnerable youth develop decision-making and communication skills so they can deal with the complex problems and situations that can lead to drug use. The centers also provide a range of attractive, accessible, and affordable activities—such as sport clubs, language lessons, computer and job training, rap and break dance classes, hiking and outdoor clubs—as well as professional, youth-friendly counseling and social support.

In association with the youth center, Dilnoza runs a club called “lichnost” (self). Through the club, Dilnoza wants to provide psychological consultations for troubled youth and a helping hand for youth dealing with severe problems in their lives. “I want to help them discover their own untapped potential and positive aspects of their character,” she said.

<http://www.psi.org>

http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/aids/

Central Asia, May 2004