



RESTORING HOPE: *CRS AND HIV*

In just over 25 years, 65 million people around the world have contracted HIV, with millions more affected by the disease. Those growing numbers – and the millions of orphans and other vulnerable children left behind – endanger the development of many regions of the world. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) provides care and support to those whose lives have been overturned by the virus, restoring hope to patients, families and communities.

HIV, or the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, attacks the immune system, killing white blood cells. Transmitted through bodily fluids, HIV makes it harder for a person to fight off illnesses and infections. AIDS, or Autoimmune Deficiency Syndrome, is a clinical diagnosis given when the immune system of someone living with HIV is functioning at an extremely low level. Patients do not die of AIDS; rather, they die of illnesses that their bodies cannot stave off when they have AIDS.

The prolonged sickness and possible death of those with AIDS diminishes families' abilities to thrive and communities' social cohesion. Poor families and societies affected by the disease are often underserved, and young women often cope with the greatest risks and shoulder the greatest burdens associated with HIV.

CRS Programming

More than 39.5 million people are living with HIV around the world. CRS' HIV policies call for the affirmation of human dignity and seek effective means of addressing the crisis. In partnership with other secular and faith-based organizations, CRS directly supports more than 4 million people affected by HIV around the world through more than 250 projects in 52 countries. These projects provide a comprehensive continuum of services, from initial testing to nutritional support to home-based and palliative care.

The Catholic Church operates broad networks that provide quality health care, education and social services around the world, reaching deep into communities that other organizations do not regularly access. As a Catholic agency, CRS partners with these networks in many of the places where it works, though programs provide help to people without regard to race, creed or nationality. The Vatican estimates that globally 12 percent of care providers for people affected by HIV are agencies of the Catholic Church and an additional 13 percent are Catholic organizations such as CRS.

Treatment

HIV attacks the body by weakening the immune system, making it vulnerable to infections like pneumonia and tuberculosis. Over time the quantity of virus in a patient's body grows and the immune system weakens, leading to AIDS.

Antiretroviral therapy, also known as ART, is a combination of medications that helps reverse this potentially lethal progression. Without this treatment many people die within five years of infection.

HIV/AIDS Quick Facts

- In 2006, approximately 39.5 million people lived with HIV in the world, with 24 million cases in Sub-Saharan Africa alone.
- There were 4.3 million new cases of HIV and AIDS in 2006. Approximately 530,000 of those were children under the age of 15.
- AIDS killed 2.9 million people worldwide in 2006.

Community-Based Care and Support Quick Facts

- The Vatican estimates that 25 percent of HIV treatment and care centers worldwide are Catholic-based.
- CRS supports more than 250 HIV projects in 52 countries with a total annual value of more than \$120 million.

The toll is particularly significant in Africa, where almost three quarters of all people living with HIV reside. Until recently, high costs left antiretroviral therapy out of reach for much of the developing world. But a promising combination of decreasing costs and increasing awareness of the life-saving nature of these drugs is expanding the availability of ART – and restoring real hope to many people living with HIV in the developing world.

Funded by the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), CRS has been able to provide ART to 100,000 people living with HIV in nine countries as part of the AIDSRelief consortium. The number of people served is constantly growing, as CRS helps spread hope around the world.

Nutrition

People living with HIV require more food to maintain their energy level, but they are also likely to lose their appetite and reduce their dietary intake at the very time their nutritional needs are greatest. In many parts of the world, HIV strikes families and communities that are already suffering from poor nutrition. CRS programs use a holistic approach that encourages people, including those infected with the virus, to care for themselves through proper diets and a well-rounded regimen of care. Strengthening the nutritional status of people living with HIV helps to improve the quality and length of their lives.

Food Security and Nutrition Quick Facts

- Seven million African agricultural workers in 25 countries have died from AIDS-related complications since 1985. Another million will die over the next 20 years.
- In several countries, 60 to 70 percent of farms have suffered labor losses as a result of the epidemic.

The relationship between HIV and nutrition is further complicated in poor rural areas. In these places, farmers and their families may become too sick to work, or too busy caring for sick loved ones to cultivate food. The virus has caused the long-standing social and economic structures of these rural communities to disintegrate.

CRS tries to help bolster the nutritional status of people affected by HIV in several ways, including distributing food rations, and working with communities to promote sustainable agricultural practices and develop food markets. Through agricultural programs and initiatives that help build stable and vital economies, the agency aims to ensure that every man, woman and child has enough to eat.

HIV Prevention

CRS aims to reduce the transmission of HIV while caring for those who are most in need. CRS takes an integrated approach to prevention that is grounded in the Catholic Church's teachings on human sexuality and in best practices garnered from years of experience. All program activities encourage abstinence-until-marriage and marital fidelity and contain messages about risk avoidance that are widely recognized as essential components of successful HIV interventions. CRS also supports risk-reducing practices – including delaying sexual activity, limiting the number of sexual partners, engaging in voluntary counseling and testing, treating sexually transmitted infections, and taking precautions that promote blood safety and limit blood-borne infections.

The majority of CRS prevention programs are offered with the local Church. CRS works to build the Church's capacity to respond to HIV in local dioceses around the world, while using the Church's vast educational and pastoral infrastructure to increase the number of people exposed to healthy educational messages. CRS also works with the Church to engage other faith-based groups and advocate for appropriate government responses.

Advocacy

In the United States, CRS advocates for policies and practices that promote justice and improve the lives of the people we serve worldwide. Congress has already begun reauthorizing PEPFAR and CRS is actively advocating for improvements in the legislation. Please join us in our advocacy on this and other important global issues by joining the CRS Legislative Network. Visit <http://actioncenter.crs.org/signup> today or call 1-800-235-2772 ext. 7264 for more information.