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Success Story

Prisoners working with prisoners: a successful peer outreach strategy in Costa Rica

“At first, the other prisoners did not take me seriously and mocked the activities. However, after opening up with questions related to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, the one-on-one outreach grew to group interventions”.



Roberto¹ is a 50-year-old man incarcerated in the Cocorí Prison of Cartago, Costa Rica. He was first reached by the Pan American Social Marketing Organization -PASMO, known as Proyectos en Salud Integral -PSI in Costa Rica, under the USAID Combination Prevention Program for HIV in the month of May, 2013.

In order to be able to conduct combination prevention interventions in the prisons, the Program conducted extensive outreach and negotiation with the directors and administrators of the prison system, and after many months, PSI was finally allowed to begin working with incarcerated men under the approach used for men at-risk for HIV.

Roberto is one of eight peer leaders recruited and trained by the Program to later replicate the behavioral interventions designed by PSI. He says, “At first, the other prisoners did not take me seriously and mocked the activities. However, after opening up with questions related to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, the one-on-one outreach grew to group interventions”.

The Cocorí prison currently houses around 450 prisoners, separated into three areas according to the type of felony or crime committed. Approximately 75% of prisoners are 18 to 25 years old and are awaiting sentencing. To respond to the needs of this population, the Combination Prevention Program not only trained the peer outreach leaders for each area of the prison, but also worked to negotiate the availability of latex condoms and water-based lubricant at the stores within the prisons, something traditionally rejected by prison administrators. The process has also included the sensitization of these administrators and directors who have now opened up to the possibility of conducting combination prevention interventions in their establishments.

During the 2013 fiscal year, PSI, the local member association of Program partner, International Planned Parenthood/Western Hemisphere Region, ADC (Asociación Demográfica Costarricense), through the private laboratory, ASEMBIS, and other services providers worked to conduct “sweeping the zone” activities in the Cocorí prison. This implies providing the complete essential or minimum package of combination prevention services to the prisoners, including behavioral interventions, biomedical services such as HIV testing and counseling, complementary or structural services such as stigma and discrimination, and other services such as haircuts and dental services to provide an integral approach to health.

Today, Roberto continues to be a peer leader within the prison. “Even though the subject matter is difficult to address, the interactive methodologies I learned make it easier to discuss”. Roberto also acknowledges that within the prisoners, there are different needs, for example, those who receive conjugal visits, those who have families outside the prison, and those who maintain relationships with other prisoners.

As a result of the successful implementation of this peer outreach strategy with prisoners, the Program has received requests from other prisons in the country to expand the interventions to their establishments. By the end of FY2013, the Program in Costa Rica was able to reach 380 prisoners with combination prevention interventions.

¹ Name has been changed to protect the identity of the person.