



## STORIES FROM THE FIELD

# New Networks Bring Hope to PLHIV

**Networks in Wuzhou and Luzhai offer opportunities and help PLHIV overcome barriers to access services.**



*As part of their income-generation activities, PLHIV make silk flowers.*

“This is a new approach to establishing networks of PLHIV and helping PLHIV to carry out self-help and livelihood initiatives and, thus, reduce stigma and bring them back into society.”

—Chen Jie, Deputy Director-General of the Guangxi AIDS Office, on the “Wuzhou Model”

WUZHOU & LUZHAI | Eighteen months ago, Wu Yi, a former injecting drug user, and resident of Wuzhou, in Guangxi Province, could not have imagined the creation of a network of people living with HIV (PLHIV) in China. Stigma remains high and few HIV-positive people have openly disclosed their status. When Wu Yi’s HIV status was disclosed in a local newspaper in April 2006, he recalls that even motorcycle taxi drivers refused to give him a ride.

A resident of the nearby Luzhai, Yang Hong recounts the hopelessness he felt upon learning his HIV-positive status. “I heard that when people got HIV, nine out of ten will die,” he recalls. “The idea of committing suicide was in my mind.”

Today, new PLHIV networks in Wuzhou and Luzhai are bringing hope and reducing the stigma HIV-positive people face in their communities.

The USAID | Health Policy Initiative provided technical assistance and training to a core group of PLHIV leaders, culminating in the formation of the Wuzhou PLHIV Network in March 2006. From March–September 2007, the network grew from seven members to more than 360.

To make the network more sustainable, the Health Policy Initiative helped the network to form a multisectoral Steering Committee that includes PLHIV, representatives of local government, and health officials. In addition to the opportunities for education, stigma reduction, and influence created by its multisectoral structure, the steering committee also provides ongoing technical assistance to the network.

In a little over a year, the network and steering committee have helped improve access to care and support and reduce stigma and discrimination. In May 2006, they successfully advocated for changing the rules regulating the government’s basic living allowance, which has, to date, made it possible for 57 poor PLHIV to qualify for support. In addition, the Wuzhou Health Department granted US\$25,000 to the network to support free treatment for opportunistic infections. The network also received US\$2,600 from the Global Fund for vocational training. Moreover, the network earned two “Praise Letters” from the

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*Yang Hong leads an informal discussion among PLHIV leaders, the local health bureau, and project officers in March 2007.*

police and a community organization acknowledging the network's "noble" role in responding to local issues. This is a significant achievement given the extreme stigma surrounding HIV.

Wu Yi and other PLHIV have dedicated themselves to further strengthening the Wuzhou PLHIV Network, raising awareness, and advocating for HIV prevention in the community. As a result, more people are now coming forward for voluntary counseling and testing (1038 persons), antiretroviral treatment (36 persons), and methadone maintenance treatment (162 persons).

Upon learning of the network in Wuzhou in March 2007, Yang Hong was eager to replicate the approach in Luzhai. He was among 90 PLHIV who attended policy and advocacy trainings conducted by the Health Policy Initiative in April and August 2007. As a result, Yang Hong helped establish the Luzhai PLHIV Support Group in June 2007, which currently has about 160 members. Following the approach in Wuzhou, the support group in Luzhai also formed a multisectoral steering committee.

Though only a few months old, the Luzhai PLHIV Support Group is already making a difference. The group has secured US\$10,600 from the Global Fund Round 4 to provide social support to PLHIV and foster income-generation activities. Now, Yang Hong is full of confidence and hope for the future. He asserts, "I will help more PLHIV step out the shadows, and help them rely on themselves and come back into the mainstream of the society."