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HIV Legal Clinic Opens in Vietnam

New hotline and clinic help people living with HIV understand and access their legal rights



PHOTO CREDIT: BRITT HERSTAD

A lawyer and PLHIV counselor provide advice to a client at the Legal Clinic in Ho Chi Minh City.

For more information on the legal clinic or hotline, please contact:

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Vietnam has made significant strides in creating a supportive HIV/AIDS legal and policy environment. In 2004, the government released a national HIV/AIDS strategy and, in 2007, a comprehensive law on HIV/AIDS came into force. The country now has an overarching national policy framework that supports access to treatment, care, and support; strengthens prevention efforts; and seeks to address stigma and discrimination.

Turning this policy framework into practice is the aim of a new legal clinic and hotline. The HIV/AIDS Legal Clinic, based in Ho Chi Minh City, provides legal advice and assistance to people living with HIV (PLHIV) and those affected by the HIV epidemic. In addition to the clinic, which provides face-to-face counseling, a legal hotline with a national toll-free number has also opened in Hanoi. The clinic and hotline are operated by the Center for Consulting on Law, Policy, Health, and HIV/AIDS (CCLPHH), a Vietnamese NGO based in Hanoi and affiliated with the Vietnam Lawyers Association.

The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, through the USAID | Health Policy Initiative, helped to establish the hotline and clinic. Working with local partners, the Health Policy Initiative:

- Recommended the legal clinic model as a means for implementing the country's HIV/AIDS law and policies;
- Provided financial support to hire lawyers to staff the clinic;
- Helped to formulate the clinic's operating norms and procedures, such as how to guarantee clients' confidentiality; and
- Provided capacity-building training to clinic and hotline staff on specific provisions of the HIV/AIDS law. (The Health Policy Initiative had facilitated participation of PLHIV in reviewing and providing comments on the draft law and then assisted the National Assembly in making recommended revisions.)

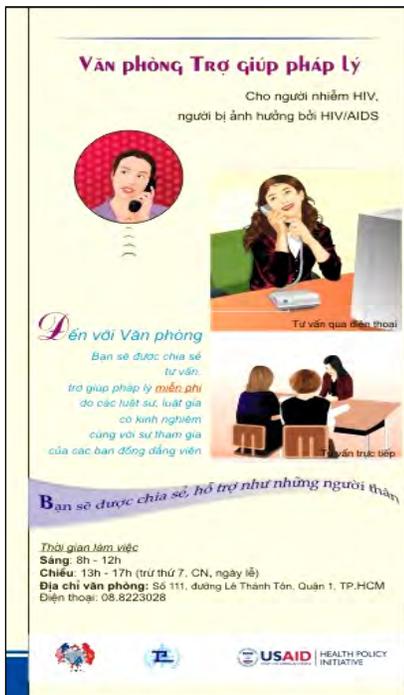
While the HIV/AIDS policy environment in Vietnam is developing rapidly and conditions for PLHIV are also improving, misinformation, ignorance, and hostility are still pervasive and hinder access to prevention and treatment services—as Van's case illustrates.

Van is a young mother living with HIV in Ho Chi Minh City. She moved to the city from central Vietnam with her husband six years ago to find a

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"I am happy that the legal clinic is supporting me to provide an education for my son."

—Van



A poster advertising the legal hotline.

better life. A year after she moved, she gave birth to her son, Tuan.¹ Her husband has since died and she is raising her son on her own. She is doing the best she can and works hard selling lottery tickets to provide Tuan with the things that will help him develop and thrive. Like most young children, Tuan was looking forward to beginning school this year, and Van was happy that her son would be starting his education. But this was not to be. Parents at the school Tuan was to attend found out that his mother was HIV positive and pressured the school to refuse his admittance.

Van is one of the first clients of the HIV/AIDS Legal Clinic in Ho Chi Minh City. The clinic is staffed by four PLHIV counselors and three lawyers. Staff at the clinic have counseled Van, and linked her with a range of supportive services in the city. They are also working with health and education officials to change the attitudes that deny an education to children affected by HIV/AIDS.

The clinic has been open for less than three months, yet the staff have taken on many cases and provided advice to many more people seeking help and support. The types of advice and assistance include helping PLHIV who are migrants and their children to obtain documentation that will allow them to register for services; supporting people undergoing drug rehabilitation to access HIV treatment and care; and providing referrals to other HIV/AIDS services. Similarly, the hotline in Hanoi has received many calls and is rapidly becoming a valuable resource for people affected by HIV/AIDS in Vietnam.

As next steps, the Health Policy Initiative will help expand the legal clinic model to other provinces; analyze the underlying issues in cases to identify any needed areas for legal or policy reform; and continue to build the capacity of clinic and hotline staff.

¹ Names have been changed.