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WORK WITH YOUTH IN
HIGH-RISK SETTINGS

SNAPSHOTS FROM THE FIELD



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Cover photo: Peer educators confer on a Wednesday morning at FOSREF's Clinique Jeunes in downtown Port-au-Prince. All photos by John-Manuel Andriote/FHI.

“When you come to the centers, you learn that life is beautiful and different.”
Dr. Harry J. Beauvais, FOSREF’s Directeur Technique

The Clinique Jeunes (Youth Clinic) is a beehive of activity on a hot November morning in downtown Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Young people are everywhere in the small corner building—waiting for appointments with nurses, planning photo and video club activities, meeting in groups of peer educators.

Clinique Jeunes is one of 11 youth clinics operating throughout eight departments (states) of Haiti run by FOSREF (Fondation pour la Sante Reproductrice et l’Education Familiale) and supported by Family Health International (FHI). Dedicated to serving the reproductive health needs of young people, the clinics’ operating philosophy is simple: “Take your time, protect yourself, enjoy your future.”

FOSREF’s first Clinique Jeunes opened in 1988, funded completely by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Supported today by USAID’s IMPACT Project, which is managed by FHI, the youth clinics in 2003 alone reached nearly 125,000 young people through street theater presentations in four departments of Haiti. The 10 paid peer educators and volunteers at each clinic in 2003 helped reach an additional 48,552 young people who have participated in sensitization sessions aimed at de-stigmatizing HIV and AIDS.

THE CLINIC AS COMMUNITY CENTER

Each Clinique Jeune functions like a community center, offering young people free services that include counseling and psychological services, voluntary counseling and testing for HIV, family planning, gynecological care, treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and laboratory tests. Prevention messages, including those that promote delayed sexual debut, are an important feature of FOSREF’s work. But the clinics also offer social activities, including dance (salsa and other Latin dances are especially popular), traditional drumming, language clubs, and opportunities to serve other young people. The social activities are intended to promote self-esteem and teach young people skills they can use in the rest of their lives.

The clinics’ overall goal is to show young people a healthier way to live than what they might be accustomed to, explains FOSREF Directeur Technique Harry J. Beauvais, MD, MPH. “When you come to the centers,” he says, “you learn that life is beautiful and different.” This perspective can contribute strongly to a desire to protect oneself against unwanted pregnancy, STIs and HIV/AIDS, he points out. These are major problems in Haiti, the poorest and least developed country in the Western Hemisphere. Young Haitians experience a high rate of unwanted pregnancy, abortion, STIs and HIV infection. The combination of poor knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and a lack of accessible health services is an ongoing concern for groups like FOSREF. An estimated 23 percent of boys and 15 percent of girls have their first sexual experi-

ence before age 10, while 15 percent of adolescent girls between 15 and 19 years old have had at least one pregnancy.

Some 200 young people each day take advantage of the services and programs offered at the Clinique Jeunes in Port-au-Prince. There are offerings for each segment of the youth population, including peer education programs, programs for in-school youth and “edu-tainment” that combines entertainment and educational messages.

ACCEPTANCE IS KEY TO REACHING YOUNG PEOPLE

The key to successfully attracting young people to the Cliniques Jeunes is providing an atmosphere of acceptance and comfort, says Anick Supplice, MPH, FOSREF’s deputy chief of programs. “It is critical that our clients trust us,” she explains. They must know “that we want what’s good for them, not to tell them that what they are doing is wrong.” This nonjudgmental approach is particularly important for young people involved in selling sex, since recent FOSREF focus group discussions revealed that many young sex workers are “street kids,” she says, “and what we see on the streets is only the tip of the iceberg.”



Outside FOSREF’s Clinique Jeunes in downtown Port-au-Prince

In fact, an extraordinary number of young Haitians engage in sex work in one form or another, according to Dr. Louis Marie Boulos, director of the Centre d’Evaluation et de Recherche Appliquée (CERA). With support from USAID and FHI, Dr. Boulos is overseeing a second behavioral surveillance survey of Haiti (the first was conducted in 2000) to assess the behaviors that put Haitians at risk for HIV. He explains, “Poverty is so extensive in Haiti that girls go into prostitution just to bring money home.” He noted that male prostitution—where, typically, poor, illiterate men sell sex to educated, middle class men—is also common.

PEER EDUCATORS REACH OUT

FOSREF’s youth clinics rely on their networks of 15- to 24-year-old peer educators to reach out to young people, help get them connected with the most appropriate programs and services, and generally make them feel welcome. To become a FOSREF peer educator, one must complete a seminar that covers all dimensions of reproductive health, including abstinence, condom use and issues of gender equity, Ms. Supplice explains. Each seminar typically trains about 30 new peer educators.

Peer educators meet monthly to plan activities and school visits. Ms. Supplice recounts a 2002 meeting in southeastern Haiti that illustrated the young people’s commitment and enthusiasm for

their work: Because the roads were impassable by car, the groups walked through the mountains to reach the site of their meeting.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO HIV/AIDS PREVENTION FOR YOUTH

The shaded drive opens onto a lively scene on the porch of a large white building with blue shutters across the street from the Ministry of Education building in downtown Port-au-Prince. Teenagers are hanging out, some playing dominos, others talking and laughing. The Maison des Jeunes (“youth house” or “youth center”) is open on this national holiday, Armed Forces Day (November 18), and a special two-hour variety show is about to begin.



VDH's Maison des Jeunes, across from the Ministry of Education in downtown Port-au-Prince

Although they do not offer clinical services, the 20 Maisons des Jeunes operated throughout Haiti by VDH (Volontariat pour le Developpement d'Haiti) provide referrals to clinics, counseling and social activities. Young clients themselves participate in planning the houses' activities.

Alexandra Roy Jean-Louis, VDH's health program coordinator, says the organization's programs and services emphasize a holistic approach that addresses clients' social, emotional, economic, physical and spiritual health. VDH's

overall goal is to increase young people's awareness of HIV and other reproductive health issues in the larger context of their life. It presses community and government leaders to support youth-centered activities and health services, and it trains health providers to diagnose and treat STIs in young people. Because VDH is one of the few organizations that work with youth on a national scale, it “plays an important role in the national effort to prevent HIV/AIDS among youth and promote health,” Mrs. Roy Jean-Louis says.

With FHI's support, in fiscal year 2003 VDH trained 47 new peer educators, age 15 to 24, opened five new Maisons des Jeunes and conducted 198 educational sessions. Workshops to build job and entrepreneurial skills are especially popular among the young people who visit the Maisons des Jeunes because of the country's high unemployment rate. “Youth, even those who finish twelfth grade, can't find jobs,” says Mrs. Roy Jean-Louis. “Youth want to help their families, but there are no jobs. When there are jobs available, they tend to be taken by adults.”

Like young people everywhere, most young Haitians figure life will eventually sort itself out. But today, the group at Maison des Jeunes has more immediate interests—such as winning a dominos game or winning the attention of the cute young boy or girl with whom they have been flirting. They watch attentively as their friends perform short dance routines and educational skits, and listen intently as they sing popular Haitian songs.

JEAN CASSENDI RICHARD: HAITI'S YOUNG MESSENGER

Today's master of ceremonies, Jean Cassendi Richard, VDH's assistant coordinator for youth and community participation, laughs with his young friends, helps the disc jockey coordinate the right tunes with each act and generally moves things along.

"Cassendi," as he is called, clearly loves his work. He neatly sums up the Maisons des Jeunes this way: "We work on the total development of young people, get them to blossom, think about and prepare them for the future."

Cassendi has long believed the most effective messages about HIV prevention for young people come from other young people. "The most important thing," he says, "is the young people as actors in transmitting the messages, not just receiving them." At 23, this resident of la Paine du Cul-de-Sac is

still a member of the age group of young Haitians most at risk. For this reason he felt obliged to contribute his own time and talent to help his peers remain healthy and avoid HIV.

Most of Maisons des Jeunes' programs weave messages about HIV prevention and overall health into cultural activities, which "are specifically designed to educate young people while allowing them to have fun," Cassendi says. The mostly 10- to 19-year-old clientele help plan these activities. "They feel at home," says Cassendi. "They feel a lot of pride in being able to invite their friends and families to see the talents they have and activities they helped organize." Various clubs at the Maisons des Jeunes—including theatre, dancing, cinematography and literature clubs—help them "develop their talents while using communication messages about HIV/AIDS."

Some young people who come to the Maisons des Jeunes train to become volunteer peer educators, just as Cassendi himself did for two years before becoming a full-time VDH employee three years ago. He is one of about 60 VDH employees today.

Although the primary target group is in-school youth under age 19, Cassendi says those up to age 24 are welcome to join a support committee that helps arrange activities for younger people. Cassendi says this is "a way of keeping older kids involved, so even though they don't benefit from all the resources, they still feel a part of the VDH family."

VDH'S THREE-PRONGED APPROACH

VDH intervenes with young people in three different areas, according to Mrs. Roy Jean-Louis. Each area addresses clients' social, emotional, economic and physical health. First, VDH offers



Jean Cassendi Richard and Alexandra Roy Jean-Louis at VDH headquarters, Port-au-Prince

health-focused educational, mentoring and counseling services through some of the Maisons des Jeunes. Second, VDH supports the socioeconomic integration of youth into society. Skills and entrepreneurial training workshops are especially popular among Maisons des Jeunes' clients because Haiti's unemployment rate is so high. Some of the Maisons have cyber-cafes offering access to information technology. Others may have a restaurant that young people manage, generating some revenue for the Maison.

VDH's third focus is on community participation. VDH presses community leaders, parents and government officials for services tailored to the needs of youth. The organization also advocates for young people's rights, such as their rights to information, health and privacy. When youth participate in planning, executing and evaluating activities, "they show the adults in the community that youth are capable of being active and productive," says Mrs. Roy Jean-Louis.

To keep these activities operating, Cassendi is grateful for outside support. "Haiti does not have many resources, and financing from the U.S. government through FHI and other sources allows VDH to work in places that are very far away from the capitals of the departments," he says. "I have been very satisfied that there has been a large impact among youth I have encountered. That motivates me even more."