

Institutionalizing HIV/AIDS Education in the Training Program of Foreign Service Personnel

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is one of the leading labor sending countries in the world, both for land-based workers, as well as seafarers. By the end of 2003, there were 3,601,042 Filipinos deployed as contract workers in 192 countries. Filipino seafarers also constitute about 20-25% of seafarers deployed in international sea-going vessels (Manuel G. Imson, Labor and Employment Acting Secretary; Presiding Chair of Maritime Training Council). In 2004, alone The Philippines deployed a total of 933,588 registered migrant workers (POEA Annual Report). Looking at these figures in the light of the growing HIV/AIDS global epidemic, and the harsh realities faced by migrant workers, it is daunting to even consider how vulnerable the migrant workers are to HIV infection. Equally challenging is the tremendous responsibility of the Philippine Government to protect these Filipino overseas workers from the threat of HIV/AIDS. The issue of safeguarding Filipino migrant workers becomes even more urgent now that the number of this sector in the Philippine AIDS Registry is steadily increasing. Although these figures are biased because only migrant workers are required to undergo HIV testing, they nevertheless show the alarming condition faced by migrant workers. As of May 2005, there were a total of 2,279 HIV Ab seropositive cases reported. Of this figure, 33% (758) were Filipino migrant overseas workers. This figure is further broken down to the following job categories: 36% (271) were seafarers; 17% (127) were migrant domestic workers; 9% (69) were other land-based workers; 7% (56) were health workers, and; 7% (51) were entertainers.

Issue

The Philippine economy depends highly on the remittances of overseas Filipino workers to keep it afloat. In fact, the current Administration is openly promoting overseas migration as an option for employment because it can no longer support the current labor force. However, with this promotion for labor migration, the Government needs to recognize its central role in keeping Filipino migrants safe and protected from HIV infection. Among the three phases of migration, it is on site or at the receiving countries where migrant workers are most vulnerable to HIV infection. Unfortunately, it is also on site where Government has the least support structure. This is due to the structural limitations of the embassies and consulates, including manpower and budget, and the tremendous lack of knowledge and capacity of embassy personnel on the realities faced by Filipino migrant workers and their vulnerabilities to HIV/AIDS, as well as on handling related problems. As a result, Embassies cannot fully provide assistance to migrant workers on the issue of HIV/AIDS because the staff does not have the capacity.

Project

Through the Project Acceleration Fund of the Joint UN Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), Action for Health Initiatives (ACHIEVE), Inc., the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), the Philippine National AIDS Council and with very valuable input from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, hatched a project that aimed to train the trainers FSI on HIV/AIDS, migration realities and HIV/AIDS counseling, and pilot a training among Foreign Service Officers who were about to be deployed. For sustainability we explored the feasibility of incorporating this training program into the existing training programs of FSI. This project ran from the latter part of 2003 to the first quarter of 2004.

The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) was established as the career development arm of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Its tasks include the following: to serve as the center for the development and professionalization of the career foreign service corps; to serve as a research institution on issues and problems with foreign policy implications, global and regional strategies and management of foreign

affairs; and to serve as the institutional consultant of the Department on matters related to foreign policies and programs as well as development management, planning and review. Through the conduct of the project, we learned that FSI had a Cadetship Program which was a six-month training program for junior-level officers that will be deployed to Philippine Posts overseas. They also conduct a pre-departure orientation seminar for personnel who have been given foreign assignments and are about to leave. Given this mandate of the FSI, it was the ideal choice for institutionalizing an intervention that was designed to impact on the lives of Filipino migrant workers abroad.

As far as the project is concerned, ACHIEVE needed to deliver the following: One pilot training among Foreign Service Personnel, one training of trainers of the FSI, and one manual or guidebook for Foreign Service Personnel on handling HIV/AIDS among Filipino migrant workers on site.

ACHIEVE conducted the Training of Trainers. The participants in this training represented different government agencies that dealt directly with overseas migration. This was a two-day activity that incorporated basic HIV/AIDS education; realities of migration, foreign policy issues and basic HIV/AIDS counseling training. The participants were also asked to develop an action plan based on how they, as trainers, plan to apply the knowledge and skills they've learned. The feedback from the participants was very encouraging. They planned to echo their learnings to their co-workers and they also wanted to push for the integration of this training program in the existing training programs of their respective government agencies. The participants also gave the following recommendations for ACHIEVE to work on:

- To include HIV/AIDS orientation in the curriculum of the on-the-job (OJT) training or cadet training of the foreign service officers,
- Newly-appointed vice-consuls should undergo training on HIV/AIDS.
- HIV/AIDS should be included in the CARMIN (Career Ministers) module. (DFA)

As a result, ACHIEVE was able to establish a stronger partnership with FSI with the objective of integrating an HIV/AIDS and Migration training program in the training program of FSI for Foreign Service Personnel.

The pilot training was done with a batch of Cadets who were, at that time, undergoing the FSI Cadetship Program. The components of the training were similar to the Training of Trainers except that it was contextualized in their work as future Embassy or Consulate Officials. During the training, we invited participants from the Training of Trainers to observe with the expectation that they will, in time, conduct similar trainings.

In the meantime, the guidebook was also being developed. The plan was to distribute the guidebook to all foreign posts to serve as a reference for Embassy and Consulate officials in the event that a Filipino migrant worker approached them on site seeking assistance related to HIV.

Because ACHIEVE adheres to participatory approaches, migrant workers and female spouses of migrant workers who are living with HIV/AIDS played a major role in the implementation of this project. They were resource persons, trainers and consultants in the different activities covered by the project. The success of the trainings is reflected in the insights of the participants:

“The most valuable insight I learned from yesterday’s session is that OFWs are not statistics. They are real persons with real stories from which we can learn a great deal. These stories have made me realize that a smile or a scrub matter a lot to our migrant workers who visit our embassies abroad. That is why it is imperative that embassy

personnel should show genuine concern and provide the best service to their compatriots who are defenseless and have no one else to turn to while working in foreign and harsh lands.”

“Personally, the entire session increased my awareness, acceptance, understanding, and sensitivity about HIV/AIDS and its implications on OFWs and their families. Professionally, it equipped me with the appropriate knowledge and background for future foreign service work especially among Filipinos with HIV/AIDS.”

Results:

The project life ended shortly after the training of the Cadets. However, the partnership with FSI continued. There were continuous consultations and negotiations on how to sustain the trainings among Foreign Service Personnel and even among the staff of the Department of Foreign Affairs who were based in Philippines. At this point, the biggest limitation was budget. Since the project has ended, ACHIEVE can no longer sponsor additional trainings with FSI. It was then up to FSI to source funds for the trainings they wanted to conduct.

Because of the positive feedback of the participants of the trainings, the FSI management was very supportive of the effort of those we trained to become trainers. The effort paid off with the conduct of an HIV/AIDS and migration training for two batches of personnel from the Department of Foreign Affairs. FSI shouldered the expenses and ACHIEVE was invited to conduct the training. These trainings served as a debut for the trainers we trained – they handled the session on Basic HIV/AIDS.

Also, ACHIEVE was invited to conduct pre-departure orientation seminars for Embassy personnel who were about to be deployed to foreign posts. From August 2004 to present, there have been a total of four pre-departure orientation seminars. Plus ACHIEVE was again invited to conduct the same training for another batch of Foreign Service Cadets.

ACHIEVE’s initiative to enhance the knowledge and skills of Foreign Service Personnel has now been integrated in the training program of the Foreign Service Institute and thus have become institutionalized in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Due to the success in institutionalizing this training program and the strong recommendation of the training participants to also train their senior-level officers (from Vice consuls up), a second proposal was developed and again submitted to UNAIDS. With the endorsement of the UNAIDS Philippine Office, ACHIEVE was granted a second phase from the UNAIDS Project Acceleration Fund to scale up efforts in the Foreign Service Institute and the Department of Foreign Affairs. The second phase is expected to commence this month. A crucial component of this second phase is the setting up of a pool of HIV/AIDS Champions in the Department of Foreign Affairs that will ensure the project’s sustainability. Finally, one of the most important outcome of this project happened among the migrant workers and the spouses of migrant workers living with HIV/AIDS. In the process of their involvement, their own knowledge and skills were also enhanced.

Lessons Learned:

ACHIEVE has gained a lot of insights from this project. The most important lessons we have learned in this effort to institutionalize this kind of intervention are the following:

- It is crucial to build partnerships with stakeholders who have hands-on experience on the issues we are working on because they can provide vital information on the most feasible strategies that can be developed.
- The meaningful involvement of the affected communities cannot be overstated. Without them, this project would not have been successful.
- Lastly, although direct provision of services and information are vital intervention strategies, it has become very difficult to sustain because of limited resources. We need to be passing on capabilities and skills so there can be more people, more institutions doing the work that needs to be done.

By institutionalizing this training program on Migration and HIV/AIDS within the Department of Foreign Affairs, we are assured of the continuous and sustained capacity-building of Embassy staff, thereby boosting their ability to provide meaningful assistance to our migrant workers working abroad.

Acknowledgement

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All the migrants and the female spouses of migrants who so generously shared with us their lives