

Giving Back Our Dignity

Hoc Mon HIV/AIDS Continuum of Care Project
Vietnam

Cong and Diem are 26 years old, live in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and are in love. These facts, in themselves, are not impressive. That both lived on the street, are recovering from heroin addiction, were held in drug rehabilitation camps for five years, are HIV positive and now dry, employed, and poised for life - is. Cong and Diem are employees at the new Hoc Mon District Community Center in western Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The Community Center, funded by Catholic Relief Services and Caritas Norway, was founded in January 2007 to assist individuals who have HIV and those at high risk for contracting it, their families and partners, to handle the social, psychological and economic effects of the disease.



Over 50% of *people living with HIV/AIDS* (PLHA) in Vietnam are drug users. People most vulnerable to HIV infection in the country are thus injecting drug users (IDU)¹, sex workers, their clients, partners and children. To correct the illegal behaviors of drug use and sex work, the Vietnamese Government accommodates individuals in drug rehabilitation centers that do little more than serve as holding cells; little drug rehabilitation and education is actually provided. Cong and Diem both spent five years in a rehabilitation center. Upon release from the center, residents face enormous obstacles to reintegration including remaining drug free, finding employment and housing (families of women in particular often refuse them back), seeking and receiving health care. Seen as immoral individuals and disease vessels, returning residents and PLHA tend not to seek care until they are extremely sick and then often die alone and in pain.

The Hoc Mon Community Center aims to change this situation by providing an immediate entry point for returning residents and community members alike. A variety of non-discriminating services are on offer including specific counseling for IDU and PLHA and their families, introduction to voluntary counseling and testing, educational activities for community members and appropriate information on available health and social services. The community center will be equipped with information on vocational training opportunities established by the Department of Labor as part of a city-wide plan to integrate a large number of residents returning home in 2007 and will organize small-scale income generation activities such as Christmas ornament production. With an on-site coffee shop, the center aims to serve all community members regardless of health status. A stark sign of stigma reduction will be the frequenting of the center by the surrounding population.

PLHA themselves will play a vital role in the center's management and programming by counseling clients on drug relapse prevention, accompanying them to the nearby out patient clinic, assisting them with adherence to ART medications, and providing community members

¹ Unsafe needle injecting practices leads to contamination of needles and the quick spread of the HIV virus within drug injecting communities.

with truthful information on HIV, thereby minimizing fear of infection, often at the root of stigma.

Diem and Cong live with Cong's mother in a modest dwelling. Before learning of plans for the Community Center, Diem refused to get tested for HIV. Without a program providing counseling, medications, a safe space for gathering and peer support, knowing her status would have handed her only a death sentence and the accompanying fear and despondency. But after the Lunar New Year, she will get tested. And with medications newly available in Vietnam, if Diem is HIV positive, she could still have a baby who is HIV negative. Cong and Diem are trailblazers for Hoc Mon and for all of those places in Vietnam where PLHA cannot yet stand tall.