



U.S. Agency for
International
Development

Bureau for
Global Health

SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

Youth Alert! “My Life, My Future”

THE POPULAR EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR school-aged adolescents in Malawi called Youth Alert! uses school visits, a weekly radio magazine show, an activity booklet, and educational events to get the message out about HIV/AIDS prevention. Youth Alert! is demonstrating that the right approach, coupled with contemporary messages, can build a large and lively social movement on a platform of healthy behaviors. Youth Alert! has overcome critics by focusing on abstinence while also addressing the core messages of safe sex.

Malawi is a small country in Africa with a big problem. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is one of the most severe in the world, with more than one million of its 10 million people HIV positive. The spread of HIV is most devastating among the young people aged 15 to 24 and is driven by early sexual debut, multiple partners, and cross-generational relationships. Thirteen percent of reported AIDS cases are among this group, with women outnumbering men three to one.

In 2001, Population Services International (PSI) in Malawi launched Youth Alert! Supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development, this program for school-aged adolescents is a huge hit and is growing rapidly. Operating on the premise that fun-loving, image-conscious adolescents respond poorly to gloomy messages about illness and are more responsive to upbeat, youth-oriented activities, Youth Alert! engages adolescents socially through special events and clubs that appeal to their interests and tastes. Teams of peer educators, wielding the slogan “My Life, My Future,” give adolescents an opportunity to talk openly about their dreams and goals and to identify obstacles such as sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy.

Youth Alert! combines entertainment with education and gives the straight facts about reproductive health, the consequences of risky sexual behaviors, and how HIV is transmitted. The program dispels myths and promotes virginity and delaying sexual debut as being “cool.” Messages about self-esteem and responsibility are interwoven with information about HIV prevention.

During an educational presentation in one school, a student remarked, “I was confused about



Photo courtesy of PSI

A Youth Alert! peer education team visits a secondary school and presents a high-energy message stressing abstinence and personal goal setting.

AIDS before Youth Alert! came to our school. It seems that when boys and girls talk privately, they make up their own rules and facts. But in meetings like this, we can all understand and agree on what’s right.” Comments like this are typical from adolescents who are starved for facts and desperate for alternatives that will keep them safe. Such responses also provide important feedback to peer educators and other program staff, which helps to reinforce their dedication to their mission: an AIDS-free future for the youth of Malawi.

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