



Position Statement
Jamaica AIDS Support
2004 – 2005 Anti-Stigma and Discrimination Campaign Launch
October 26, 2004

The measure of a society is determined by the way it treats its most vulnerable members. Yet, if we look around us in Jamaica, we will see that our society has become increasingly hardened to the violence that impacts the less fortunate among us. These persons include the homeless, the mentally ill, the very poor, the disabled, as well as gay and bisexual men living in poverty, people who sell sex, and people living with HIV and AIDS.

Since its inception, Jamaica AIDS Support (JAS) has placed the issues of stigma and discrimination against persons living with HIV as well as against those who are socially vulnerable to abuse high on its agenda. This priority is consistent with our work in stopping the spread of the virus for those who are uninfected, and providing care and support for those who are already HIV-positive, regardless of colour, race, disability, gender, class, sexual orientation, age or religious belief. It is our belief that stigma and discrimination, which have long been features of Jamaica's response to the HIV epidemic, drive those who are HIV-positive underground and prevent members of groups that need services and information from coming forward to seek these in a safe and supportive environment.

It is known that HIV does greatest damage in societies where marginalisation and violence against vulnerable groups are considered normal. In fact, UNAIDS has documented the clear link around the world between stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and vulnerable groups, and the spread of the virus. At JAS we routinely receive reports of the brutal violence that our client groups face, including being stabbed and beaten by mobs in their neighbourhoods or in public places. We must state that in recent years there has been important improvements in the way that persons affected by HIV/AIDS are treated generally—we no longer receive reports of tyres being placed around the necks of persons suspected of being HIV-positive and set alight. However, twenty years into the epidemic in Jamaica, HIV-positive people are still routinely beaten because of the fear that their presence in communities poses a health



risk. This is despite the fact that we know that HIV is a sexually transmitted disease which is not spread through casual contact.

The situation is particularly harsh for HIV-positive women generally and more so for HIV-positive women with children. Many of our clients are women who come to us because of their concern for their children's wellbeing at school, at home, and in their communities. Relationships that once nurtured these women are abruptly and violently withdrawn, as many are abandoned by their families, leaving them and their children vulnerable and alone. Children whose parents are discovered to be HIV-positive are also discriminated against, with many no longer able to access an education, while others are rejected by their families, leading to a growing number of children made vulnerable because of HIV and AIDS in Jamaica. When the children are themselves HIV-positive, the problem is worsened as the discrimination levelled at them is twofold. On the one hand, they have to look on while their primary caregiver is abused and increasingly abandoned by family and community, and on the other, they become the target of abuse once their status is known.

In addition to persons who are HIV-positive, there are those groups that are affected by the virus and whose members have traditionally been marginalised by Jamaican society. Men who have sex with men as well as female sex workers constitute two such groups. When members of these groups test positive for HIV, they face the challenge of being doubly discriminated against. As we have said in the past and feel compelled to say again, Jamaica has a problem of viewing entire groups and the people perceived as members of these groups as disposable. It is a problem that crosses all the dividing lines in society and which has become part of the Jamaican understanding of how we relate to one other in everyday life. Consequently, some of us have come to accept the violence and hostility meted out to vulnerable groups; others of us have remained silent in the face of it. We know it is happening but tell ourselves that it is a rare occurrence, refusing to acknowledge that members of these groups are specifically targeted for cruel and degrading treatment.

The silence of individuals and civil society around this targeting of vulnerable groups serves to cover it up and allow it to continue without offenders being held to account. The danger in this is that we don't know when we ourselves will become vulnerable. Not



everyone who is accused of being gay is in fact gay. Not everyone accused of being HIV-positive is in fact HIV-positive. But often perception is given more weight than reality in our society. Further testament to the injustice of the way we treat vulnerable people comes in the way many people who test positive for HIV react upon discovering their status. Most people who test positive for HIV never expected it could happen to them. When suddenly they find themselves marginalised and targeted, because of their status as persons living with HIV, in a way that they accepted as normal and even right when it was aimed at somebody else, they begin to understand the seriousness of being discriminated against. It is a difficult lesson to learn, but it points to the fact that we should not wait until we ourselves are targets before we confront the marginalisation of others through violence and discrimination.

We at JAS are calling for a dialogue that can help all of us to rethink the kind of society that we want to live in and build our future on. We believe that that society should be one that treats people, regardless of their status, in a gentler and more civilised way. We are calling on our fellow Jamaicans to consider a society that recognises and values the fact that persons affected by this virus are human beings just like anyone else.

As part of its mandate under the agreement with the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and in partnership with the National AIDS Programme, JAS will, over the coming months, undertake a campaign to reduce stigma and discrimination against persons living with HIV and AIDS and against members of socially vulnerable groups. As part of this campaign, we have added a new page to our website that will focus on stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS, sex workers and men who have sex with men. The webpage will contain documentation of human rights violations against these groups and testify to instances of support and redress from the community or from key social institutions such as the police force and the public healthcare system. To help us, we have trained persons across the island to document instances of stigma and discrimination as well as instances of good treatment of persons living with HIV and AIDS and vulnerable groups. This community work will be complemented by a mass and group media effort that will challenge us to think about how the issues of discrimination and violence against vulnerable groups affect the lives of all Jamaicans. We will be placing public service announcements on radio and television, and producing, in partnership with the US Embassy Office of Public Affairs,



five documentaries on how discrimination affects the lives of our client groups. We will be launching our third anti-stigma and discrimination calendar and poster in November, and today we are introducing a song by the DJ the Informative History Man that will accompany the campaign.

We believe that any organisation and any society wishing to effectively address the HIV epidemic needs to confront the issues of prejudice and abuse faced by persons living with or affected by the virus. We call on civic groups and human rights organisations to join with us in recognising the seriousness of the state of affairs in Jamaica today and to work together to bring about the transformation that we so badly need into a more humane and more just society.

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