

Innovative Approaches to Addressing the Health Care Needs of the Urban Poor in Nairobi Slums



Photo by: Jhpiego/Kenya

A doctor examines a baby at a Kenyan health clinic.

“Jhpiego has improved the provision of health services in the health facilities found in the slums of Korogocho and Viwandani. The services are benefiting the community and there is evidence that this program has been successful.”

*—Dr. Daniel Nguku,
Chief Medical Officer
for the City Council of Nairobi,
Kenya Ministry of Health*

Background

Jhpiego, an affiliate of The Johns Hopkins University, has worked in Kenya for 35 years to improve the health and welfare of women and their families. Since the first Jhpiego training courses were conducted in Kenya in the early 1970s, Jhpiego has developed innovative health care solutions tailored to the diverse needs of residents throughout the country.

An important and growing focus for Jhpiego is the health of Kenyans who reside in informal urban settlements, commonly referred to as slums. Because of societal challenges such as disenfranchisement and poor security, among others, these communities have an unmet need for reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and other health services, despite being located in the midst of bustling urban centers. With support from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Wallace Global Fund, Jhpiego’s urban programs seek to ensure that people living with HIV in Nairobi’s Korogocho and Viwandani communities have access to comprehensive physical and psychological health care services.

Successes and Solutions

Jhpiego’s approach to linking health care providers with the communities they serve has been extremely successful. By working with health care providers and slum residents to identify and address their needs, Jhpiego has energized the communities of Korogocho and Viwandani to actively seek to improve the quality and accessibility of health care.

Jhpiego has trained more than 200 slum-based health care providers serving a client base of over 120,000 people. Jhpiego has also organized and promoted community health days in which thousands of community residents, including people living with HIV, are not only provided with immediate health care services—such as voluntary counseling and testing, immunizations for children and family planning—but are also referred for psychological, legal and/or spiritual support.

The true success of Jhpiego’s programs in the slums has been the overwhelming buy-in from the communities, often extending the programs’ impact beyond their original scope. For example, youth peer educators who were trained by Jhpiego to counsel their peers on safe reproductive health and sexual practices worked in their communities to reduce the violence in the aftermath of the January 2008 elections. These peer educators saved lives by using the skills they had learned to diffuse tension and maintain calm. Another group has started a new non-profit organization called Expert Patient Trainers International, which is made up of “expert patients”—people living with HIV—who build on their personal experience to train health care providers on how to offer more sensitive, client-focused HIV services.



Health care facility in an urban slum.

“I have been taken care of by the people who were trained in home-based care when I was bedridden. Now I am back to my feet and I thank Jhpiego for training the community members on this.”

*—Anonymous client
living with HIV*

A Look at How Jhpiego’s Approach Works: Building a Referral Network

Working with nongovernmental and faith-based organizations, Jhpiego has led the effort to create an extensive referral network so that providers can direct clients to the correct health facility, and community members can easily access the services they need. The process of developing an effective referral network has the following three critical components:

Educating and empowering clients and the community—Jhpiego links community members with a range of health care services, empowering them to be proactive and knowledgeable about their health while helping to address stigma in the community, particularly for HIV-positive individuals. These services include: counseling and testing for HIV; antiretroviral

therapy; reproductive health services such as family planning guidance and advice for pregnant women and children with HIV; nutrition education; immunizations; connections to support groups; and advice about legal rights for people infected with HIV.

Training and preparing service providers—To maintain a successful referral network, the doctors, nurses, midwives and community health care providers who work in the slums must be prepared to receive clients. HIV-infected individuals living in the slums face many challenges, including stigma and discrimination from family, friends and colleagues; lack of adequate nutrition; and general ignorance about HIV transmission. Many community residents also lack knowledge about family planning and reproductive health services. Jhpiego has developed a thoughtful, comprehensive approach that strengthens providers’ technical capacity to respond to these unique needs and increases access to high-quality health care.

Equipping the facilities—Jhpiego has improved the services offered at health clinics by equipping them with basic infection prevention supplies such as disinfectants, soap, gloves, buckets, trash bags, basins and individual hand towels. Staff are trained on how to care for and replace these supplies so that all clients have access to clean, safe and operational health centers. Incinerators have also been constructed at these health facilities to further improve infection prevention practices.

Looking to the Future

The challenge of providing high-quality HIV/AIDS and reproductive health care in the slums is daunting for both clients and providers. Building on its strong history of investing in sustainable and practical solutions, and through its innovative approaches to community-facility linkages, Jhpiego is poised to scale up its successes in the slums to other parts of Kenya and beyond.