ORGANIZATION

NAME OF ORGANIZATION: Peer Counselling Association of Jamaica (PCAJ)

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IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROJECT

NAME OF PROJECT: Youth Development & Behaviour Modification Project

TYPE OF PROJECT:

The abovenamed project was conceptualized to promote awareness among adolescents and youth on social issues that compromise their welfare and well-being. Its intention is to promote and develop programmes and implement activities to prevent potential social crisis situations among youth in selected communities. PCAJ built on its existing programmes in this area and solicited funding from UNFPA to enhance its efforts and potential for positive impact.

Some of the main objectives of the project are:

- Reducing the onset and high incidence of crime and violence, STIs and HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancies and so on

- Reducing youth involvement with weapons, drugs and gangs in selected communities

- Creating and disseminating strategic and effective messages to combat violence and promoting STI/HIV/AIDS prevention among adolescents and youth, through community groups and schools

- Generating support from government, police, NGOs and civil society to find productive alternatives to crime and violence for youth in the target communities
Provide increased access to reproductive health information to adolescents, youth, parents and youth groups through the establishment of a pool of trained community facilitators.

LOCATION OF PROJECT:

Activities were implemented in several sub divisions within the Maxfield Park community. They include Frog City, Jamestown, Rome and Arnett Gardens. These are areas noted to have a large adolescent and youth population and behaviour dysfunctions that need continuous interventions.

PARTICIPANTS/BENEFICIARIES

Melrose Primary and Junior High School: 27 students (12 males and 15 females)

Glenhope Place of Safety – 80 females, aged between 11 and 17 years

Community sensitization sessions held in:
Frog City: Approximately 25 young persons within sexually active age groups
Jamestown: The numbers varied because of the nature of business conducted at the meeting point and the constant flow of persons in and out of the meeting place
Rome: No meetings held in this community during the reporting quarter
Arnette Gardens: No meetings held in this community during the reporting quarter
**ACTIVITIES**

**ACTIVITIES PERFORMED DURING THIS QUARTER:**

- Peer counseling activities commenced in March at the Melrose Primary and Junior High School in Maxfield Park. A total of twenty seven (27) students were selected by teachers for involvement in related activities. The students also showed a healthy interest in PCAJ’s peer counseling programme. Training was conducted two days a week (Thursdays and Fridays) with the selected students in different aspects of peer counseling, including peer counseling techniques, knowledge base enhancement on prominent youth issues, and so on. The Course Outline for the In-School Peer Counselling Programme is attached.

- PCAJ continued to facilitate behaviour modification sessions with the residents of Glenhope Place of Safety for Girls in Maxfield Park. Visits were made to the Centre on Tuesday of each week. The young females continued to be sensitized to issues of sexuality, violence, abuse and so on, together with counseling on modifying their individual behaviour and influencing them to engage in positive and healthy decision-making. One-on-one counseling sessions were held with the girls because of the confidential nature of their individual challenges.

- PCAJ moved a step further in bridging the gaps in the relationships between the residents of the Place of Safety and their parents, by visiting many of their parents residing in various parishes. The visits and counseling sessions with the parents helped them to appreciate the need to build relationships with their children, thereby preparing both child and adult for reconciliation when they are discharged from the Place of Safety.

- Medical personnel from the Ministry of Health volunteered their services to conduct health checks on the young women at the Centre. They also volunteered their time during outreach activities at night among commercial sex workers in New Kingston.
Above average violence was prevalent during the reporting period in Rome and Arnette Gardens, hence the suspension of community sessions on the advice of the community leaders.

PCAJ organized community tours in Rome and Arnette Gardens with the community leaders, to impress upon the youth the need to desist from violent behaviour. Former offenders and ex-convicts who PCAJ used as resource persons gave testimonials of their experiences resulting from violent behaviour and involvement with gang activities.

Community outreach activities were organized and conducted once a week in the communities of Frog City and Jamestown for young people considered most vulnerable and at risk. Bursts of violence in these two communities inhibited night-time interaction with target groups, so the programme was conducted during the day. A total of twenty-four (24) outreach sessions were held. Each session in Frog City was attended by approximately twenty-five (25) persons. However, vast numbers who did not attend the community sessions turned up when condom distribution began. PCAJ took the opportunity to engage in one-on-one counseling with some of those community members, and also issued HIV/AIDS risk cards along with condoms to those persons.

The number of persons varied in Jamestown because the venue chosen was an informal “hang-out” spot (Malet’s Bar), which is frequented by young people daily. Clients come and go constantly so it is not easy to keep a tab on numbers. Informal group discussions take place on behaviour issues and personal choices which could be irresponsible at times.

HIV testing was carried out in the two communities once a month by Ministry of Health personnel who volunteered their time and resources for this purpose. As a result of the examinations, there has been a notable increase in requests for condoms by sexually active individuals.

Former offenders / ex-convicts and persons infected with the HIV/AIDS virus were used as resource persons during community outreach activities, to reiterate the consequences of
irresponsible behaviour and decision-making. In addition, members of the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF) Community Relations Department made presentations on issues of crime and violence from an enforcement and compliance perspective.

- Night-time activities continued once a week as in the previous months. They included distribution of condoms and IEC materials to commercial sex workers on pertinent issues. Peer Counsellors were present in night clubs in the Kingston Metropolitan Area for public education purposes. Caesars and Polly Royal Nightclubs were particularly selected because many of the commercial sex workers who offer their services at these nightclubs live in all parts of Maxfield Park. This strategy was adopted because the taboo associated with their nighttime activities does not permit them to work within the communities within which they reside. Condoms were also distributed to several young people at those locations. PCAJ worked in collaboration with personnel from the Priority for Local AIDS Control Effort (PLACE) Programme implemented by the Ministry of Health.

- HIV testing was conducted during Safer Sex Week, which was observed in February. The programme was spearheaded by the Ministry of Health.

RESULTS

- Since the commencement of the in-school peer counseling programme, the trainee peer counselors were involved in disseminating information learnt during training, on youth sexuality and behavioral issues. This allowed them to provide much valuable support to the Guidance Counsellor of the school.

- All persons of the target group with whom PCAJ interacted were able to freely access reproductive health information that could positively influence more responsible decision-making.

- Another situation worthy of mention is that a few of the females are living with HIV and AIDS, as a consequence of which they are discriminated against within the Centre. PCAJ
workers assisted in the socialization process among the residents, resulting in increased acceptance of the mentally disturbed and HIV infected individuals housed in the place of safety.

- PCAJ’s interventions during one-on-one counseling sessions have been effective to some extent, in that there was a notable decrease in reports about violent behaviours. This change among the aggressive residents deterred them from forcing alternative sexual lifestyles on others.

- As has been the trend over the past few months, a high demand for condoms was evident, which signals an increased awareness of the need among young people to practice safer sex. At this stage in the project, the percentage increase in condom use cannot be ascertained, as this is a longer term objective.

- Reduced changes in criminal data, teen pregnancies and HIV/AIDS statistics also cannot be determined at this stage in the project, as these too are longer term objectives. However, it was observed that females especially have become more resolute in adopting good habits that would not compromise their health status. In addition, regular interaction with the communities revealed that some young men, who were prone to violent behaviour, have been behaving differently after having heard the testimonies and experiences of ex offenders.
NEW DEVELOPMENTS & CHALLENGES

- The demand for condoms continued to increase, resulting in quick depletion of available PCAJ stocks before demand could be satisfied. A request has been made to UNFPA to intervene in the acquisition of additional supplies, but this has not yet been provided.

- As stated in the last status report, although PCAJ has been working in volatile communities for over a decade, members’ safety could be compromised in the wake of unexpected civic disturbances. PCAJ has developed a close relationship with the area constabulary officials and community opinion brokers for their support in event of any disturbances that could put the members at risk.

- This project allowed PCAJ to work with suicidal youth for the first time since its existence. It would serve the organization well to receive further training to effectively manage persons within such a target group. This is noted as a new challenge.
REMARKS/LESSONS LEARNT

➢ Timely interventions have proven to change decisions that could have been fatal to affected youth. A programme of this nature needs to be ongoing for as long as possible. Much work has to be done to sustain change within the Glenhope Place of Safety and the community as a whole.

➢ The close relationship established between PCAJ and the Maxfield Park community has witnessed the development of a high level of trust by the members and increased credibility enjoyed by the organization.

➢ It is essential for communication links to be maintained between the parents of the residents of the Glenhope Place of Safety and PCAJ. This is to nurture a support mechanism for the girls after they leave the institution. However, PCAJ is not equipped with the resources to sustain long term monitoring of post institutional relationships between these parents and their children, as the residents come from all across the island and not Kingston alone.

➢ PCAJ is hoping for similar developments in a wider range of communities and institutions during an extended project life.

➢ The linkage between safe sexual practices and availability of condoms could only be sustained if supplies of this commodity (low cost or free) are readily available to young people who are targeted in this project.