Group Counseling Training Helps HIV/AIDS Workers in Botswana

A grant through Indiana University’s School of Education supported Chancellor’s Professor Rex Stockton in designing and implementing group counseling training in sub-Saharan Africa. Stockton, a professor of counseling and educational psychology, had responded to a request by Dan-Bush Bhusumane, president of the African Association of Guidance and Counselling (AAGC), asking for assistance in training those who were doing frontline work with HIV/AIDS in Africa. Botswana was selected as the site for the pilot training in group work procedures because there was already a group of interested individuals. Botswana currently has one of the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in the world, currently at 38 percent.

In the collaborative project between IU, AAGC, and the University of Botswana, 15 people—counselors, government social service workers, nursing personnel, and a military chaplain—were trained in group counseling procedures during an intensive one-week training in the capital, Gaborone, during August of 2004.

One of the program’s goals was to establish culturally sensitive methods for group counseling. The first phase introduced basic principles and practices of group counseling. In the second phase, group members were given more time to practice group facilitation skills in small practice groups, all done with every attempt to be cognizant and respectful of cultural norms and differences. Members appreciated experiencing the development of trust and cohesion in their learning groups as they would develop them in real-world groups. In the final phase, participants more directly applied these principles by forming a working group and discussing the daily challenges they face in a world devastated by HIV/AIDS.

The workshop also discussed how to best use the information, insights, and experience gained from the group counseling training in working with teachers and the orphans in their classrooms, using it for culturally sensitive and efficacious prevention and treatment measures, and as a way to address the denial that surrounds HIV/AIDS.

In view of the positive feedback from participants, Bhusumane has recommended that the program be made available to other countries in Africa. Several sub-Saharan countries have already expressed interest and commitment to training that might be made available through AAGC. Group work seems to fit very well with the African cultural environment and will augment current practices of providing services for mental health and social support.

In July and August of 2005, the training will be expanded in Botswana and additional activities will take place in Kenya and Rwanda. It is anticipated that these and other related activities will continue to expand as time and resources permit.

In addition to Bhusumane, Stockton was assisted by his wife Nancy Stockton, director of the counseling and psychological services at the IU Health Center. Keith Morran, professor of counseling and educational psychology, and research assistant Leann Terry helped develop the training materials. As the project expands and more sophisticated evaluation procedures can be incorporated, Morran and Floyd Robison, professor of counseling and counselor education at Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis, will participate more fully in the project.

Stockton, who has long been committed to expanding the development of counseling internationally, says of this pilot project, “The focus is on helping these mental health workers cope more effectively as they work with the personal and emotional effects from HIV/AIDS and other major traumatic experiences.”

—Rex Stockton

For further UN information, see: www.unaids.org/wad2004/report.html