

Beyond the workplace, into the community

The current statistics for HIV infection in this country speak for themselves. No one can question the necessity for employers and trade unions to play a part in alerting South African workers to the dangers of HIV/AIDS. Similarly, policies guaranteeing the fullest protection against discrimination in the workplace are vital, as is the availability of the best possible medical benefits to HIV positive employees.

But where to from there? The scale of the pandemic surely places a responsibility on South African employers to take the message further afield - out of the workplace, and into the community. A ground-breaking HIV/AIDS awareness programme set up by NUMSA and the Ford Motor Company of Southern Africa (previously SAMCOR) aims to inform, educate and assist workers, as well as their families and the communities in which they live.

The commitment and effectiveness of this programme was recognised at a conference convened in September 2000 by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Washington, aimed at fostering and facilitating HIV/AIDS programmes in the workplace. At the conference, Ford South Africa was the only company outside the US to be given one

NUMSA and Ford Motor Company of Southern Africa have implemented a ground-breaking AIDS awareness programme that sets new standards for the industry. Joanne Bloch investigates.

of eight awards commending its HIV/AIDS workplace programme.

The programme, which to date has cost R238 000, was initiated in mid-1999. Before this time, there was no policy in place. 'Until then, our attitude was similar to one that you unfortunately still see all around us in industry, commerce and even in trade unions - people talk about AIDS, but it is still somewhere 'out there', says Johan Strydom, manager of personnel services at the Ford plant in Silverton. In Ford at least, these attitudes have now changed for good.

From the start, says Strydom, this programme sought to address the issues of HIV/AIDS in the company holistically and in depth. 'We asked the managed health care division of our head office in the US for guidance and help,' explains Strydom.

A joint project between SA Labour Bulletin and the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS) and sponsored by ACILS

'They sent experts out here to survey the situation as regards HIV/AIDS. They looked at it from all angles - medical aid services, retirement benefits, the whole spectrum. With the help of their projections and input from a local expert, we then sought to sensitise all the stakeholders to the seriousness and the reality of HIV - that you can no longer look at it and say it's government's problem, it's somebody else's problem. That attitude is short-sighted and really unwise.

The next move was to set up a steering committee on which all stakeholders were represented, including NUMSA, white-collar personnel, senior manufacturing management, as well as the public affairs and human resources departments. It is chaired by our chief executive officer (CEO) Marcos Oliveira.'

Policy

The steering committee developed a formal company policy document, which was published in the Ford in-house magazine and also widely displayed as a laminated poster in the company.

The policy document included photographs of the steering committee and the two co-ordinators of the AIDS programme.

'We wanted to show the employees the people dealing with this matter,' explains Strydom. 'We felt our AIDS policy has to be a live document, not just words that will soon be forgotten. That's why it's still prominently displayed throughout the company, where employees and visitors can see it. We wanted to make sure that if management says, "we will have a zero tolerance for any form of discrimination or harassment", the presence of the document where everyone can see it daily will give employees confidence and assurance that those are not just words; they must know that their supervisors

have to abide by the policy too, or face the consequences.'

Education and training

Next, training and educational materials were developed. A peer educator manual and a manual for employees were designed in such a way that semi-literate people could access them. Twenty peer educators were then trained for the Silverton plant and 20 for the plant in Port Elizabeth in four-day workshops. Included in this figure were members of contractual staff involved in areas such as gardening and catering.

'At the end of October 1999, we hosted an HIV/AIDS seminar for the entire South African automobile manufacturing industry,' says Strydom. 'Senior human resources people were present from Toyota, Mercedes, Delta, Volkswagen, Nissan and BMW. We informed them of what we had done so far, and what our plans were, offering resources, guidance and so on. We have the same trade union in this industry, we all do the same work at different places. It makes sense for us all to focus on the important issues affecting us in a similar kind of way.'

Strydom feels that the approach taken by Ford in educating the workforce about HIV/AIDS got off to an excellent start. 'Many companies have been raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, but the way we went about it was unique,' says Strydom. 'We switched off the lights, called every single employee and shut this entire company down for an afternoon. We had hired 3 000 chairs and built a massive podium in the factory with spotlights and a sound system.'

At the awareness-raising event, the CEO addressed the employees, declaring his commitment to the fight against AIDS. Each peer educator was introduced to the work force, and the audience was called

upon to support him or her and consult them.

The mayor of Mamelodi, representatives from the Gauteng Health Department, as well as people living with AIDS addressed the audience. After an industrial theatre play covering the issues, all employees were issued with a handbook designed as both a reference for employees as well as a resource to be shared with family members.

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The peer education programme is now well underway. 'From top management right down, at Ford everyone, including the union, is involved in the programme,' says Collen Bonnacwe, co-ordinator of the AIDS programme at the Silverton plant. 'We work as a team. For everything we do, we come together and look at what we're trying to achieve.'

I think the programme is effective because we recognise that you can't deal with HIV/AIDS in a one-sided way. Two-way communication is vital and we have the mechanisms in place for it to work effectively.

We have weekly communication breaks in the factory, 20 minute periods where the area comes to a halt and the team leaders use the opportunity to discuss various issues with the teams,' explains Bonnacwe. 'At least once a month, our peer educators are given the opportunity to deal with an AIDS-related topic during these periods, using bulletins put out by

the AIDS committee.'

The peer educators meet weekly with their co-ordinator, reporting back on responses from the work floor, sharing information and making recommendations on the basis of the workers' responses to the education they have received.

'These meetings are vital,' says Bonnacwe. 'We are basing our education and awareness programmes on information that comes through from the workers themselves. It is not imposed from the top.'

The peer educators are supplied with new information regularly, and are often sent on workshops to update them on developments in HIV/AIDS. On weekends, they are provided with a company car to visit hospices, clinics, home-care centres and private homes, so they can familiarise themselves with the realities of the disease. They are equipped in this way to deal with questions in the workplace on the basis of practical as well as theoretical knowledge.

'For those employees who don't want to come forward in front of their colleagues, we have a system of communication boxes in place. They can put questions or suggestions for us into the box, and can request that we speak about any issue that they are not clear about. Of course they can remain anonymous if they prefer. We look at these suggestions and requests as a team and decide how best to handle them.'

According to Jimmy Khumalo, a NUMSA shopsteward and a peer educator at the Ford plant in Silverton, the Ford programme is streaks ahead of any similar campaign operating in the motor industry, if not industry as a whole. 'The policy that we have in place in this company conforms to the guidelines laid out in the COSATU policy,' says Khumalo. 'Earlier this year, three peer educators from Ford



Pic: Beyond Awareness Campaign

Peer education is an important approach.

attended a series of HIV/AIDS workshops run by the American Center for Labor Solidarity aimed at increasing awareness in the trade union movement. Two of us were NUMSA shopstewards. We took copies of the Ford policy along with us and discussed it and the programme operating here in Ford with the other participants. We found that Ford is the only company in this industry providing HIV/AIDS support to this extent. The participants all agreed that the policy is excellent. We also found that we have been well educated on all aspects of the disease and we were able to contribute a lot to the discussion.'

Other efforts

As well as the peer education programme, other efforts have been made to keep awareness of the issues of HIV/AIDS high for employees in the workplace.

One strategy has been to alter the method of condom distribution this year.

This change has had astounding results. Once additional condom dispensers made condoms freely available all over the premises, instead of only in the company clinics, the number of condoms distributed increased from 700 to over 17 000 per month.

Another equally important approach has been the recognition of the link between sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and the spread of HIV. To reduce the risk to employees on this front, the Ford programme ensures that medical staff in the company clinics have access to the latest, most up-to-date information on the identification and treatment of STDs.

At the same time, a scheme making it possible for HIV infected individuals to declare their status privately through their own personal doctor, and secure additional medical aid cover without involving the company in any way, has

been put in place.

'It is our position not to encourage employees to declare their status at work if they are HIV positive,' says Bonneckwe. 'We respect confidentiality in the workplace, to ensure that there is no possibility of discrimination. At the same time, though, we do encourage employees to go for tests, and if they find out that they are infected, to access programmes with the best possible treatment.'

Into the community

While its workplace programme seeks to ensure a high level of understanding and awareness amongst all Ford employees, the company and union make every effort to take the message to families and the community. A week after the initial HIV awareness-raising event at the factory, a

HIV/AIDS Family Awareness day attended by more than 3 000 people was held at Ford's on-site sports grounds.

As the Ford Company's progressive stance on HIV/AIDS became common knowledge, the company began to receive requests from schools, technical colleges and other community-based organisations in Mamelodi and other local communities to sponsor and be represented at AIDS-related events. It is now common for a team including peer educators and representatives from NUMSA to make their skills and resources available at these events. Often counsellors from AIDS organisations are invited to join the team and provide further input.

While once-off activities can be useful in raising awareness, more intensive and far-reaching programmes are also required to

NUMSA's response to HIV/AIDS in the motor industry

'We are 100% behind the Ford programme, and other HIV/AIDS initiatives in the motor industry,' says Dumisane Ntuli, national spokesperson for NUMSA. 'On our side, we have put plenty of human and other resources into making sure that the disease is fought: for instance we have written many educational materials and conducted HIV/AIDS workshops in Ford and other companies.'

'We had meetings with the various managements requesting their input, and the majority of companies in the motor industry are putting money, time and resources into the fight against AIDS. They are taking the pandemic very seriously. For example, Toyota has put money towards research into a vaccine, and both Daimler Chrysler and Volkswagen have awareness programmes in place.'

'So we're doing fairly well in the Motor Industry, although it would be good if we could follow the example of the mining industry, where they have opened special HIV/AIDS clinics on most of the mines.'

'I think what now needs to be done is for us to get beyond talking, and make sure that those who are HIV positive come out into the open and talk about it in the workplace – because there's still a strong stigma in the workplace. This stigma will only be overcome if infected people come to the fore and discuss their status openly.'

'We also need to make sure that medicine is freely available to HIV positive workers,' says Ntuli. 'We in the unions need to meet with the companies about this – perhaps we need to find a system where we can make an AIDS pool, with the companies setting aside money for the purpose of treatment and the union also paying in a percentage.'

'All COSATU unions work together with the national labour department to support the government AIDS campaign. We are also affiliated to the Treatment Action Campaign. Here we combine our efforts to try to pressurise the government to provide the medication that our people require.'

challenge and change entrenched attitudes.

In partnership with the CDC, and the Center for Labor Solidarity, Ford and NUMSA are now designing and developing new programmes aimed at reaching out to the communities where company employees are resident, in Port Elizabeth and Silverton. The funding for all of these projects comes via CDC from Ford US.

A six-month pilot project planned for the Port Elizabeth region involves life skills training, focusing on HIV/AIDS, for grade six and seven learners in 40 primary schools. The project is due to commence in February 2001. It will be intersectorial, involving the University of Port Elizabeth, the Port Elizabeth City Council, the Eastern Cape Department of Education, and local NGOs.

In Pretoria, three projects are planned for early 2001. One of these projects will engage local NGOs to provide family education on HIV/AIDS. 'The families are predominantly the families of our employees, although we might even reach further,' says Strydom. 'In each family household there are teenagers. While we deliver a strong message to our employees, there's no way of knowing if it reaches the children, or whether it reaches them in an appropriate way. A particular individual might just not have

the personality to speak to his children about these things. We are hoping that this programme can fill in the gaps.'

The other two projects are designed to provide care and support both for people living with AIDS (PWAs), and for AIDS orphans. 'We would like to assist in the funding and co-ordinating of income-generating projects started by PWAs,' explains Strydom. 'We are determined not only to talk workplace. There is an important role for us to play in the community.' ★

Joanne Bloch is a freelance journalist and photographer. This article was written as part of the Medlaworkers' Project of the Beyond Awareness Campaign.



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