

**Shoot for Safety:
A Hepatitis C Awareness Network
For Youth in Cairo, Egypt
100 Projects for Peace Proposal
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Statement of Purpose

The primary purpose of this grant application is to secure funding to enable the implementation of a support network to help Egyptian youth deal with the hepatitis C epidemic that has ravaged the country. We will recruit and train a core of educated young adults to spread the message of hepatitis C awareness to their communities and social circles. We will then use the mobilization of these youth to leverage the establishment of several youth-focused Hepatitis C support groups that will provide a forum for dialogue and discussion for those who have the disease or have relatives/friends with the disease. To support our efforts, we have partnered with the Missouri/Kansas chapter of the American Liver foundation, and Freedom, a well established NGO based in Cairo that is targeted at reducing substance abuse in youth. Ultimately, it is our hope that our program will energize and inspire youth to take action now to forestall the possibility of a more serious disease epidemic in the country in the future.

Background

Hepatitis-C virus (HCV) is an emerging global epidemic that has managed to largely escape the attention of the international community. The disease is commonly spread through sexual contact and blood contamination. Individuals infected with the virus suffer from liver cancer, cirrhosis and chronic liver infection, leading to liver failure and even death. The number of hepatitis C cases globally has been rising at an alarming rate, due in large part to low testing frequencies for the disease as well as inadequate general awareness of the virus worldwide. Many experts believe that without substantial action to curb the spread of hepatitis C, the worldwide death toll due to HCV will soon surpass that of HIV.

Demonstrated Need/Rationale

While the hepatitis C epidemic continues to grow globally, some nations have been more drastically affected than others. Egypt reports by far the highest incidence of hepatitis C in the world, with a population infection rate of over 20% (global avg. 3%). Yet despite the alarming prevalence of the disease in the country, awareness of the disease remains startlingly low. Among youth especially, ignorance about its origins and transmission is rife, and fatalism about the chance of contracting it creates recklessness and a dangerous climate of resignation. In Cairo, the extremely high prevalence of the disease renders dangerous not only the risk behaviors that youth in the city engage in, such as injection drug use and tattooing, but also everyday activities such as barbershop visits- all due to the possibility of HCV contraction. Since cultural beliefs and practices prohibit liver transplants and other medical interventions for HCV treatment, the importance of *prevention* among the next generation of Egyptians cannot be stressed enough.

Our desire to start this project is based on our observation that there exist no substantial efforts in Egypt to raise awareness of HCV specifically among youth. In fact, the government has only recently begun to take action against this disease at all. This is due in large part to the fact that the government was indirectly responsible for the spread of the disease in the first place- the HCV virus was inadvertently spread through use of contaminated needles during a government-sanctioned vaccination campaign against the parasitic disease schistosomiasis. Moreover, discussion of hepatitis C is greatly suppressed, since the elder, more traditional Egyptians who currently occupy leadership positions generally do not like discussing sex and other risky behaviors that lead to HCV transmission. The situation in Egypt thus presents a perfect opportunity for a dynamic community intervention formed by youth, for youth, to make a dramatic impact.

In our proposed project, we will develop a hepatitis C awareness network for youth in Cairo, Egypt. Our program will be comprised of two primary components. First, we will train a core of high school and university students that we will recruit through Freedom to serve as hepatitis C educators to their peers and communities. This will set into motion an organic and intimate process that will sustain the diffusion of a hepatitis C awareness message. Second, we will use these students and Freedom staffers to organize a support network that provides a forum for open dialogue and discussion about HCV among youth who are either personally affected by the disease, or are close to others who are infected. Through guided discussion with their peers, many of the prevailing misunderstandings about HCV can be effectively dispelled. The overall intention of our project is to demonstrate that organic initiatives that empower and mobilize youth can be effective in solving major public health problems in developing countries.

Partnerships

Our primary overseas community partner for our project will be the Freedom NGO, based in Cairo. A major goal of the organization is to raise awareness of AIDS and prevent substance abuse among youth, with a particular focus on injection drug use. In point of fact, the NGO has already expressed tremendous interest in coordinating a hepatitis C outreach program with us, as it

reports that 2/3 of the people it has tested for AIDS have also tested positive for hepatitis C, and since the two diseases share similar mechanisms of transmission. The primary partner for this project in the USA will be the Missouri-Kansas chapter of the American Liver Foundation. Working with them for the past year, we have designed a comprehensive hepatitis C educational curriculum for high school students here in the St. Louis area. The chapter has offered its help in the development of the specified informational/instructional materials for our Egypt effort, and will provide us with valuable input and advice by allowing us access to its extensive national contact and resource network.

Project Plan and Timeline (Dates described are tentative and subject to change)

Our hepatitis C youth support network will be implemented through four primary phases.

Phase 1 (February-July 2007) involves the development of the instructional materials that we will use to train youth peer hepatitis C educators as well as the production of the printed informational media that we will distribute to our educators as well as to the support network members. The instructional media will be based on the educational curriculum we have already developed for high school students in the United States. We will work with the ALF to expand on our previous work and correspond with Freedom to ensure that the adaptation of this curriculum will be culturally appropriate. We envision this instructional material to be comprised of several short slideshows as well as some supplementary printed material. We will use our skills in Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Premiere, and Flash to design presentations that will engage and captivate these youth. The informational material will be a series of 2 or 3 pamphlets which discuss general information about the disease as well as measures that youth can take to avoid contracting the disease. Since some informational materials are intended for youth other than the youth we train, it will be necessary to use grant funds to have our materials translated into Arabic. We will also begin to finalize logistics for our recruitment campaign upon our arrival in Egypt.

Phase 2 (July 10- 31 2007) involves the recruitment of our Egyptian youth hepatitis C educators. Working with Freedom, we will visit several universities and schools around the area and deliver a presentation that stresses the importance of youth involvement in stopping the hepatitis C epidemic. Motivated youth from these venues will be then invited to join our program. Additionally, we may also directly recruit many Freedom staffers, who themselves are young former injection drug users who have had either indirect direct or direct to hepatitis C. From this pool, we will choose about 20-30 youth for training. As educated students, all of the selected youth will be fluent in English, so language barriers will not be an issue. Selection criteria will be based on interest levels. Grant funds will be used to provide a financial incentive to attract participants in our training program.

Phase 3 (August 1-8 2007) is the training of the youth hepatitis C educators. In conjunction with Freedom, we will hold a week-long seminar series where we will present the instructional materials that we designed. We will include engaging group activities that we will design to foster enthusiasm for the cause of hepatitis C awareness. Additionally, we will encourage open conversation amongst the student participants to contextualize the HCV dialogue within the students' perspectives on themselves, their communities and their larger societal and cultural roles and obligations. Through this discussion, we will then prepare the students to assume leadership roles among their peers and communities with respect to hepatitis C education. Following the seminar, the educators will begin to distribute their message and the informational materials that we will provide them, and if they wish, they may initiate their own community interventions which we can then fund within a reasonable financial capacity (see budget).

Phase 4 (August 8-18, 2007) is the implementation of the hepatitis C support group network. Each of the hepatitis C educators will be instructed to organize a support group in their respective community. Although the support groups are intended to be youth-focused, they are open to anyone who is interested. We will ensure the successful formation of at least one such group, and would like to oversee 1-2 meetings. To provide a critical mass of initial interest for the establishment of these first support groups, Freedom will allow us to recruit its staffers, recovering drug addicts in its programs, and families of recovering drug users as participants in these groups.

Follow-Up and Sustainability

We will continue to correspond with our hepatitis C youth educators to monitor their progress. As natives of the country, these trained youth can spread this message to more communities and groups in the country than we could ever hope to reach alone. Through these "multiplier effects", the message of the program will continue to thrive for long after the end of the summer. Additionally, Freedom has expressed interest in continuing our program in future years as part of its ongoing efforts to reach out and promote resiliency in youth. Finally, we have also contacted Doctors Without Borders/MSF about the possibility of publishing our experiences in a report in *Alert Magazine*, their quarterly publication. We believe that this will be a good way to raise awareness of the hepatitis C crisis in Egypt in the international community.

Personal Qualifications

We have had a deep personal interest in the nations of the Middle East for many years, and are very familiar with the social, cultural, and political issues confronting the people of this region, including Egypt. Aryan's mother is from Iran originally, and she specializes in the study of Middle-Eastern issues as a professor of International Relations at Webster University. Her passion for her work has allowed Aryan to learn a great deal and has inspired him. We hope to one day use our academic background in science to help solve the various health issues that confront this region. We see this grant application as an important step towards the realization of this dream.