



UN Cares in Action

The Case of Belarus 2013

HIV Testing and Counselling

Editor: Dominique M Harrison

Contributor: Eleonora Gvozdeva



Summary

After defining knowledge of one's HIV status as their major concern, Belarus's UN Cares team promoted and initiated an HIV status and testing event for the UN staff community. With the support of Belarus's UN Resident Coordinator, effective media outlets, and rapid HIV testing and counseling, the event was a success. There was a 60-80 per cent increase in the number of UN staff members who knew their HIV status and 75 per cent of resident agencies participated. This UN Cares activity resulted in Belarus being recognized as an honouree with the 2012 UN Cares award in the category of effective HIV testing and knowing one's status.

Background and Context

In Belarus, 20,000 adults aged 15 and up currently live with HIV. The HIV prevalence is calculated as 0.40 per cent, and the number of deaths due to AIDS is 1,100 individuals.

Governmental and non-governmental agencies have supported specific policies to protect key populations throughout Belarus; unfortunately, there remain punitive laws that pose obstacles as well.

Currently, the following organizations are present in Belarus: DPI, IOM, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO and World Bank. Collectively, the organizations contribute to UN Cares, designed to offer HIV and AIDS resources, knowledge, and insight to UN personnel and their families.

UN Cares Structure/ Leadership of and Advocacy for UN Cares

From 2007, when Belarus created a UN Cares team, the key goals were to "ensure that the Belarusian UN Family fully corresponds to UN Cares 10

Minimum Standards and is equipped with knowledge and skills to provide support to the national HIV response.”¹ Belarus’s UN Cares launch included presentations of the UN Cares workplan, the UN Cares 10 Minimum Standards, and initial compliance discussions from UN agencies.

Belarus’s UN Cares team is composed of a country level coordinator, program officers, program assistants, program coordinators and analysts who contribute to UN Cares in addition to their regular work. Its members are from DPI, ILO, IOM, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNRCO, WHO and World Bank.

In 2012, UN Cares honoured Belarus for the promotion of HIV testing and knowing one’s status. Through their 2010 UN HIV Testing campaign, they reached a total of 45 people or 40 per cent of the UN population in Belarus.

Source of Funding

UN Cares was officially launched with the approval of the Joint UN Plan on HIV at the UN workplace and trainings for the UN staff. UN RC budget for the 2008-2010 workplan implementation was US \$14,000. UN Cares activities are accounted for within the UN RC budget; unfortunately how much funding is available is not annually consistent.

UN Cares- Approaches adopted

A survey was conducted in 2007 to define how many UN staff members were aware of their HIV status. A total of 60 per cent were aware of their HIV status. The Belarus UN Cares team prioritized testing and UN staff members knowing their status. As a result, testing became the top priority in the UN Cares workplan from 2007 to 2010. In preparation for the testing event, the UN Cares Task Force completed necessary steps to promote the event:

- Information about the campaign and significant HIV messages were sent to all UN agencies;
- Information about the event was uploaded on the UN Cares and UNDP official staff website;
- Information about the campaign was shared with the mass media with select national networks chosen to air the event date and significance;
- Each HR focal point within each UN agency was tasked with further promotion of the event;
- Lastly the UNCT was invited to be a part of the event.

The UN Cares team hired a national television crew and a news media website to record the event, organized the event on the UN House grounds under the UN Flag, and labeled the mobile HIV testing laboratory with the UN logo to incite UN staff participation.

The objectives of 2010 UN HIV Testing Campaign were to:

- Increase the percentage of UN staff who know their HIV status;
- Motivate UN staff and their families to know their HIV status;

The Belarus UN Cares team prioritized testing and UN staff members knowing their status. As a result, testing became the top priority in the UN Cares workplan from 2007 to 2010.

On the day of the event, testing took place on the grounds of the UN House. Participating UN staff members were tested in a mobile laboratory set up in a bus. The UN logo was visibly placed on the bus and represented UN agency support.



- Motivate the wider general public to get HIV testing and counseling;
- Attract attention and promote for wider use the new HIV testing modalities- HIV rapid testing.

On the day of the event, testing took place on the grounds of the UN House. Participating UN staff members were tested in a mobile laboratory set up in a bus. The UN logo was visibly placed on the bus and represented UN agency support. UNICEF Representative Mr. Oksamitniy, UN Resident Coordinator Mr. Broek, and the Vice Minister of Health Mr. Arnautov participated in the testing campaign. Their leadership and participation were monumental in the testing event's success. The event was recorded and posted on the national news website. The key result was a 60-80 per cent increase in UN staff that knew their status after the 2010 HIV Testing campaign. Of total agencies present at duty station in Belarus, 75 per cent participated: DPI, IOM, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WB, and WHO.

All UN staff members were encouraged to participate, full confidentiality of testing results was guaranteed and valued, while pre- and post-test counseling sessions were offered. The event's success was due to the proactive position of the UN Resident Coordinator, the availability of HIV rapid tests and the mobile laboratory, and considerable media promotion of the event. First, the UN Resident Coordinator, Mr. Broek, was tested and interviewed. His support of the event highlighted UN agency support and consideration for HIV testing. The publicity surrounding Mr. Broek's HIV status eased UN staff discomfort, and encouraged participation throughout the day of the event. Second, the use of rapid HIV tests offered UN staff members who volunteered to be tested the

opportunity to know their status quickly, to collect HIV and AIDS information and resources, and to protect their sexual health in the future. Third, pre- and post-test counseling, a requirement when testing one's HIV status, legitimised the event; participants were given support before and after the HIV test was completed.

Strengths:

- Resident Coordinator was proactively and passionately involved in the testing campaign;
- Available rapid testing kits and mobile laboratory;
- Clear and attractive communication about the campaign during both the preparation phase and active campaign phase.

Barriers:

Funding remains the largest barrier for UN Cares Belarus.

Advice to other UN Cares teams

When leading a testing campaign, successful peer-to-peer communication and peer support provides great motivation for those volunteering to be tested. Likewise, effective and adequate use of UN facilities for HIV testing increases the convenience and ease for UN staff members.

Future Project/Plans

A second phase to the 2010 HIV Testing Campaign is in the planning stages within Belarus's UN Cares programme. The goal is to reach more UN staff by increasing the percentage of individuals who know their status.

Sources

- "AIDSinfo: Belarus 2011."
- Address: <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/belarus/>
- Eleonora Gvozdeva. (Personal communication, 12 June 2013-12 August 2013).
- "UN Cares and HIV Learning-Belarus UN Plan 2011-2013."

When leading a testing campaign, successful peer-to-peer communication and peer support provides great motivation for those volunteering to be tested. Likewise, effective and adequate use of UN facilities for HIV testing increases the convenience and ease for UN staff members

