

SAVING LIVES THROUGH PEER COUNSELORS

SUPPORT FOR TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS FIGHTING HIV TO CONTINUE ANTI-RETROVIRAL THERAPY

BACKGROUND

Queenie, or Q as she sometimes goes by, is an HIV positive, transgender (trans) person living in Guyana. When Q fell ill after defaulting on anti-retroviral therapy (ART), she was hesitant to resume her treatment. The clinic had strict requirements for defaulters to follow before they could be placed on ART again. In addition, given the stigma and discrimination Q had experienced in the hospital as a trans person, she was not looking forward to going back alone. So she reached out to Guyana Trans United (GTU), an organization that supports the trans community, for assistance.

INTERVENTION

Quincy McEwan, the Director of GTU, persuaded Q to resume her treatment, accompanying her to and from the hospital. GTU stood by Q as she explained to the social worker why she was unable to take her medication:

“My financial situation is not allowing me to purchase food. It is harder for me to take the medication on an empty stomach. I am a sex



Guyana Trans United

Queenie on her way to an appointment.

worker, and I am going through a difficult time financially.”

Quincy convinced the social worker that GTU's support would ensure that Q adhered to treatment when she was put back on ART. Queenie was required to attend five counselling sessions before she was allowed back in treatment.

GTU assigned a peer navigator to monitor and support Queenie's return to treatment. The navigator provided Q with food and transportation to the clinic, accompanying her to every appointment.

Though Queenie became very ill while awaiting re-entry to ART, the support she received from GTU was constant and encouraged her to stay on treatment.

OUTCOMES

Queenie has regained her health, adopted a healthier diet and has been adherent to ART for nine months now.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. The unique challenges and needs of transgender people living with HIV can be successfully addressed through trained peer counsellors.
2. Stigma and discrimination continue to hinder the transgender community's access to health care.
3. Advocacy for the individual and collective interests of trans persons is required for even the most basic services, like taking public transportation.
4. Trans individuals need to be empowered to represent themselves and their community.