

CREATING A COMMUNITY-LED CRISIS RESPONSE TO SUPPORT PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS AND WHO ARE IN LEGAL CUSTODY IN SOUTHERN HIGHLAND, TANZANIA

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Background:

People Who Use Drugs (PWUD), who commit legal offences and are detained, experience structural barriers that prevent them from accessing health and harm reduction services. Many PWUD lack legal support while in police custody, in court, or detained in prison. Of the estimated 500-800 PWUD living in the Mbeya and Songwe regions in Tanzania, 110 PWUD enrolled in opioid agonist therapy (OAT) have been experiencing barriers in accessing legal justice and support by 2022.

Description:

In 2021, HJF Medical Research International conducted paralegal, and crisis response training for peer educators, empowering them to respond to the PWUD's unique legal, social and health challenges. About 20 peer educators were trained to support PWUDs and ensure their access to health services while waiting for their charges, bail, judgements from the police, prisons, and courts. Peer educators escort PWUD to the OAT facilities to get their medication and return to detention facilities.

Findings:

Between October 2021 and September 2022, 110 PWUD were in prison or police stations while waiting for their cases to be heard, 98% were men, and 60% were at police stations. Through the established crisis response team, 100 PWUD received assistance, which included legal support and daily access to methadone through an escort system with peer educators and police/prison officers. Legal counsel and skilled peer educators responded to the crisis situations and followed up at police stations, prisons, and/or courts.

Conclusion and lesson learnt:

The intervention enhanced retention in harm reduction services for detained clients, while reducing the number of clients with treatment interruptions due to legal issues. Continuity on OAT potentially prevents drug relapse and is crucial to a comprehensive harm reduction strategy. Advocacy for structural change such as decriminalization of drug use through sensitization meetings to law enforcement officers to enhance human right plays significant role.