



SUCCESS STORY

From Deathbed to Bedside Counselor



Hai Lipper, USAID RDM/A

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Seven years ago, Wat was brought to Mercy Center to die. Today he heads the center’s outreach team working with HIV/AIDS patients in 34 of Bangkok’s worst slums.

Wat was diagnosed as HIV positive in 1996 and came to Mercy Center in the last stages of AIDS in 2000. Unable to afford anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs and suffering from opportunistic infections and dementia, doctors gave him just a few months to live. But Wat won a lottery that gave him ARVs funded by the Global Fund, and over the next two years his health improved.

“I received support from the community, so I wanted to give something back to the community,” says Wat, now 32, who asked to be photographed full face because to do otherwise would convey shame. “I knew the biggest problem wasn’t the physical pain, but the pain that AIDS patients feel from being rejected by their families and the people living around them.”

Wat was part of Mercy Center’s first team of outreach workers, who in 2003 visited 80 patients living at home. Today, Mercy Center has 13 outreach workers and cares for more than 530 patients, nearly all in Bangkok’s slums.

Mercy Center, run by the Human Development Center, primarily operates as a hospice care and outreach education center. USAID and Family Health International have helped support its HIV/AIDS programs since 2004. The center conducts workshops for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA), sponsors events to reduce discrimination about PLHA, and runs an HIV/AIDS hotline.

Many of Bangkok’s poor don’t realize how HIV is transmitted or that the Thai government now provides treatment for PLHA, Wat said. Because of the stigma surrounding AIDS, they are reluctant to go for testing and treatment.

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Counselors visit patients one to five times a month, make sure they get ARVs and related treatment, and hospice care if needed. They meet with family and friends explaining that HIV is no longer a death warrant.

“We’re a big family, reaching out to help others,” says Wat, whose Mercy Center counselors are also PLHA. “We’re role models for HIV positive people, who see they can recover and become the leaders of their own families.”