

WINGS TO FLY

HIV/AIDS was declared a national disaster in Kenya in November 1999. This presided rising concern by the communities of Nyahururu and its environs on the increased cases of HIV infections, deaths and stigma against those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. The reality of the



devastating effects of HIV/AIDS necessitated introduction of HIV/AIDS intervention to mitigate its negative effects and curb its spread. This led to the birth of the Community Programme for HIV, Alcohol and Drugs Abuse (CPHAADA) in the year 1999 that in 2012 changed to the Community Programme for Addiction and HIV (CPAHIV) to incorporate alcohol and drug abuse interventions. Later in the year 2018 the programme started a pilot Mental Health project to respond to the needs of the people living with mental health illnesses.

Since 1999, the programme, has been implementing projects geared towards reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS and its spread. At its infant stage, the program addressed the immediate needs of the PLHIV and children made vulnerable by HIV. This was necessitated by high levels of rejection that was being experienced by persons infected and affected by HIV and the level of suffering they experienced. As time progressed, stigma levels went down and access to basic HIV management and prevention services improved. Progressively, the situation improved and the program gradually introduced community based care and support for HIV orphaned children and PLHIV in an effort to make its interventions more sustainable and promote community participation in addressing their needs. Community volunteers took the lead and the programme staff adopted the facilitator's role.

In the year 2012, the programme, developed a strategic plan that focused on sustaining its positive impacts and gradually hand over HIV interventions to the local community by empowering volunteers and beneficiaries to take up their role, as change agents and steer forward their change process. This followed three pathways that included;

- a) Impacting volunteers and beneficiaries with knowledge and skills in moving community into action, community mobilization and community based HIV prevention and management interventions.
- b) Empower volunteers and beneficiaries on self organization to nurture common interest, internal harmony, leadership, amass social capital and trust. This went hand in hand with economic empowerment through group projects and later they were empowered politically, where they formed self help group structures that run from the grassroots to the federation level that addresses members concerns at county and extra county levels.

- c) Develop and nurture the confidence of the self help group structures to confront issues affecting their members within legally acceptable means and later hand over HIV interventions to the empowered volunteers and beneficiaries.

The hallmark of this plan was reached today (2nd November, 2018), where volunteers and programme staff congregated to hand over the mantle of implementing HIV interventions to the

empowered volunteers.

In this celebration, volunteers and staff recounted their success story that extends to almost 20 years in the fight against HIV and its negative impact to the target community. Majority of volunteers acknowledged that they have grown wholesome since they joined the programme. A number of them noted that before they joined the programme they had no status or say in their local



community but today all of them hold different leadership positions in their communities in a wide range of social and community structures. Their influence in their local community is enormous and they have contributed a lot to the growth and development of their localities not only on issues related to HIV and orphans care and support but also in other spheres of life, courtesy of programme's empowerment. One volunteer said "... we have come from far, where HIV was a nightmare and then we were voiceless and powerless, but by now we have already acquired the wings to fly! and we are going far... we shall even dare the sky ..".

The future looks brighter and as a programme we have learnt that by holding on to a project even when the community can take charge of it, is one way of disempowering the community we sought to empower. Surely it is only through the community that needs in a community can be sustainably addressed.