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'Live Up' Media Campaign a Positive Approach to HIV-AIDS

by Eddie Huffman

March 8, 2007 -- The Caribbean has a higher rate of HIV-positive adults than any other place outside Sub-Saharan Africa, so broadcasters across the region have banded together to spread a hopeful message of awareness.

"Earlier approaches based in fear have not worked," said Dr. Amery Browne, technical director of the National AIDS Coordinating Committee in Trinidad, speaking during a telephone press conference Thursday afternoon. This new media campaign, he said, "doesn't instruct or lecture young people, but it says, 'You can do better, and here's how to do better.'"

To avoid past mistakes while raising awareness about the epidemic, the Caribbean Broadcast Media Partnership on HIV/AIDS (CBMP) has created a multimedia campaign called "Live Up." Focused primarily on television and radio programming and a website, iliveup.com, Live Up offers positive messages about the disease and people living with it.

"We feel very strongly that this campaign will have a real and lasting impact," said Sir George Alleyne, United Nations special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Latin America and the Caribbean and chancellor of the University of the West Indies. In the Caribbean, he said, HIV-positive people get stigmatized, facing discrimination and homophobia.

"Those things continue to impede an adequate public-health response to this epidemic," Alleyne said. "The message: We are all equal in terms of AIDS. We must treat people with the compassion and the respect they deserve. For us, inclusion must be our watchword."

The epidemic has directly affected hundreds of thousands of people in the Caribbean, according to statistics from UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS, provided by the office of Delegate Donna M. Christensen. In 2005, the Caribbean had 300,000 people living with HIV, and that same year another 30,000 children and adults were newly affected.

The news doesn't get any brighter for the territory. The Virgin Islands has one of the 10 highest AIDS case rates in the United States. According to the UNAIDS information, nearly two out of every three AIDS cases reported in the territory involves African-Americans, while one in four involves a Hispanic person.

The Live Up campaign launches this weekend during the opening ceremonies of the International Cricket Council (ICC) Cricket World Cup, which features matches stretching from Kingston, Jamaica, to Georgetown, Guyana. Thursday's telephone press conference brought together 35 media representatives and several experts on the disease, including Ainsley K. Reid, program officer for the Caribbean Conference of Churches in Jamaica.

"I have been living with HIV/AIDS since 1992," he said. But Reid has not let the disease control his life. "I choose to live up and out, eating right and exercising, becoming active in my community. I also use a condom every time."

For Reid, Live Up offers a chance to "cross-fertilize the gains we are making."

"I believe also that the Live Up campaign will not only help those living with HIV/AIDS, but also change people's opinions about people living with HIV," he said. "The discourse we are having now can change people's attitudes to a renewed spirit of love, protection and respect for every man, woman and child throughout the Caribbean."

Like several participants in the press conference, Reid echoed the Live Up theme: "Love. Protect. Respect." The campaign combines health information with words of tolerance from celebrity entertainers and athletes, including reggae singers Jimmy Cliff and Elephant Man and soca stars Edwin Yearwood and Rupee.

One video featured on the Live Up website has Rupee talking about how HIV/AIDS has impacted his life in Barbados, taking his parents away from him.

"My mother died of AIDS/HIV," he says. "My mother was infected by my father, as much as I love him. But my father's weakness -- he had a weakness for women. We have to love, protect and respect our women."

The Cricket World Cup, expected to attract two billion viewers around the world, will provide many opportunities for outreach. Public-service announcements from Live Up will air on regional television and radio throughout the event, said Jon Long, manager of member services and

corporate affairs for the ICC, "and several star cricketers will go out into the community." A player from each of the 16 participating teams will work to spread the Live Up message, he said, "including major icons of the game."

Long has seen firsthand what an impact sports can have in reducing the stigma of the disease.

"When India were playing cricket in Pakistan about 18 months ago, a young HIV-positive person accompanied the captains out to toss the coin at the start of the match," he said. "They had their arms around him and the commentators explained what was happening. We were told that that one activity had a greater impact on reducing the stigma in that part of the world than any other event."

One of the first three Live Up spots, "It's Cricket, It's Life," focuses on cricket, one of the region's most popular sports, and features young fans at a match.

"We hope that the activities we take part in here in the Caribbean can have a similarly positive impact," Long said.

The other two initial spots target HIV/AIDS awareness issues according to gender. "I Am My Own Man" targets young males, while "I Am My Mother's Daughter" targets young females, according to Dr. Allyson Leacock, CBMP chair and president of A.I. Leacock Consultancy in Barbados.

CBMP includes 56 broadcasters in 23 countries. For Live Up, organizers took care to craft a message that would reflect regional customs and appeal to a Caribbean audience, Leacock said.

"Live Up started from a regional creative-advisory team," she said. "We wanted to make sure it was grounded within Caribbean cultural mores, but also to engage the creative capacities of the Caribbean people." The campaign takes into account "local sensitivities," Leacock said, "and a lot of the nuances that are unique to us in the Caribbean."