COMMUNITY PROJECT

TITLE: Promoting and creating awareness of HIV/AIDS in the black African communities in Luton, United Kingdom.

THEME: Take Action Now and U Test 4 Life

By Mr. Nelson Anti – MPH, BSc

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BACKGROUND:

Across Luton, HIV rates among men who have sex with other men (MSM) as well as heterosexual black African men and women continue to go up. In Luton there is 622 Luton residents that are HIV positive accessing care, of which 470 are seen and treated, of whom 409 are of Black African origin (PHE, 2016).

I am an enthusiastic and a staunched member of a black African and Caribbean Church as are many of my fellow countrymen. The leading Pastor is a very influential figure within these communities. His role is pivotal in encouraging HIV/AIDS patients to take prescribed medicine as well as participating in prayer. Sadly, recent investigation by health agencies and the media exposed major concerns that some Pastors are advising their church members not to take a HIV test and to refrain from taking anti-retroviral therapy (ART) or Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP). Some Pastors prefer to teach that prayer alone will provide a cure. Those who adhered to this ignorant approach were not well served by their Pastors. In 2011, the BBC reported that Evangelical Christians Pastors claims that prayer alone could cure HIV/AIDS caused three deaths.

To make matters worse, a significant number of infections remain undiagnosed, which once again underlines the importance of testing. Black African men and women are advised to have an HIV test and a regular HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STI) screen if having unprotected sex with new or casual partners. However, the uptake in HIV testing remains relatively low, partly because of complacency about HIV/AIDS as a major global health concern, but also because of the age-old stigma around the virus that we haven't yet managed to completely shake. While diseases like cancer are addressed and discussed openly, HIV is often a topic that people avoid talking about it, which leads to a culture of shame and misinformation. Many are so afraid of contracting HIV that they avoid testing,

choosing not to know their status. Many are too afraid to tell their partners that they are HIV positive, in case they are rejected and shamed. HIV is a virus. It doesn't define anyone, and doesn't contribute or take away anything from an individual's worth. It is a health problem that we all need to discuss and tackle together.

TAKE ACTION NOW AND U TEST 4 LIFE PROJECT: This project was designed to aim at reducing new infection rate of HIV and promoting early diagnosis through setting up testing clinic in the high risk communities, promoting and creating awareness of HIV /AIDS, challenging the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV /AIDS in churches and communities through mass campaign and education, signposting people to various GUM Clinics and other HIV Support services in the community for effective treatment and medication, increasing capacity building of services and treatment to people living with HIV and their families in the high risk communities in Luton. It took place in the high-risk communities in Luton - Bedfordshire in the East of England where the majority of the black African people are populated especially in the High Town ward of Luton. The High Town community is considered as red light zones because the HIV infection is high due to women indulge in sex trade, men have sex with men, people engage in drugs due to poverty. Also, people do have promiscuous sex without protection (unsafe sex practices). The project started from 1st April to 19th December, 2016. Some of the activities were used to mark the commemoration of UK's National HIV/AIDS Testing Week (NHTW) and the World's AIDS Day events 2016. We had reactive results and those who had reactive results were referred to our partner HIV specialist at GUM clinics for further investigation and confirmation. All those people who confirmed positive HIV after further investigation is now on medication and receiving support from our partner GUM clinics staff and our trained volunteers and staff in Luton.

BIOGRAPHY

Nelson Anti is the Programme manager & Public Health Lead for Actionplus Foundation – UK since 2012. He is also the project coordinator for Inspirational Charismatic Church Luton Education Centre since 2014. He is a qualified teacher and he teaches at Brooke House College, UK as an academic tutor.

Mr Anti is a postgraduate degree holder in Public Health (MPH), which was awarded to him by the School of Health and Related Research (ScHARR) at the University of Sheffield, UK. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree, Teachers' Certificate 'A' (Maths and Agriculture Sciences) and DBS Computer Literacy pursued at the University of Cape Coast and African Virtual University, Cape Coast, Ghana respectively. He is a qualified and an accredited member of Community Safety Scheme in Hertfordshire Borough, UK and a member of British HIV Association, UK.