

HIV/AIDS anti-stigma campaign launched

An income-generating project has been set up to target people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS in low-income community settings, after a study showed that lack of food was the main reason for missing antiretroviral treatment.

The study, which was done by Dr Kevin Harvey, an HIV/STI senior medical officer, 27 per cent of the persons study gave lack of food as their reason for missing treatment. The details were disclosed Tuesday at the launch of World AIDS Day and the 'Yes, You Can' anti-stigma campaign at Jamaica House. This year's theme is 'Yes, I can ... Support Someone Living With HIV/AIDS'. Discrimination In a message from Health Minister Ruddy Spencer, which was read by Harvey, stigma, discrimination and problems triggered by the global financial crisis were identified as major challenges in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Jamaica. "A number of individuals are missing medication and clinic appointments due to a lack of bus fare and a lack of food to take with the medication," read Harvey, noting that the situation could threaten the effectiveness of treatment. The programme is funded as part of the Global Fund Round 7 Grant to the tune of \$70 million. "It (the programme) will cater to the self-identified social support needs of these persons in order to improve economic well-being and sustain reliable sources of income," read Spencer's message.

The programme will be monitored through the National AIDS Committee, which will serve as a recruiting arm through its 14 branches, along with entities such as non-governmental organisations with a proven track record of working with persons living with HIV/AIDS and other vulnerable groups. "Grants will be given to an association or group or persons living with or affected by HIV/AIDS, an individual with or affected by the virus or an individual whose situation makes him vulnerable to contracting the virus," with several ventures capable of attracting funding, the message continued.

Optimistic venture Jamaica AIDS Support for Life (JASL), a local advocacy and support group, is optimistic about the venture. Executive Director Stacy-Ann Jarrett has described it as one of the missing links in the HIV/AIDS effort. "I am very happy about it, it is welcome," she said. However, there are concerns about the sustainability of the programme and its long-term impact. "It needs to have a sustainable plan, and once I see that, I will feel a lot more comfortable about the initiative. It's a fantastic initiative that, if it is managed properly can, not only support HIV-positive (persons), but also the development of Jamaica " Jarrett said.