

Without a House but Not Without Hope: Reaching the Street “Children” of Bucharest

Mihai makes his way to the small patch of grass near the metro station where he usually finds the street children. Under a small plastic sheet held in place by string and thin twigs, one boy is asleep. Soon another boy, a teenage girl, and a young man in his twenties approach the makeshift shelter. They greet Mihai with enthusiasm and exchange greetings. These are just a few of the street children that Mihai has come to know so well. At least four times a week Mihai visits different areas of Bucharest to provide information and education about basic hygiene, STIs, HIV/AIDS and voluntary testing, and the dangers of drug use, to the street children who he has formed relationships with. What makes his outreach effective is that Mihai, like the other peer educators, used to live on the streets himself and knows firsthand what the life is like.

It is estimated that there are over a thousand children living on the streets of Bucharest. They live in difficult circumstances, often having run away from abusive parents or with no parents at all. Many sleep in subway stations or in other precarious places, until being run off by the police. ARAS, the Romanian Association Against AIDS, has partnered with the Romanian Family Health Initiative, managed by JSI Research and Training Institute, Inc., and reaches 300 people living on the streets through the use of peer educators. The majority of the beneficiaries are between the ages of 11 and 30, the group referred to as street “children.”



A temporary shelter constructed by street children in Bucharest.

sexuality, and hygiene so that data can be made available to health and social service authorities. The Peer AIDS Prevention Intervention is making great strides in improving

The Street Children project is just one success story of the Romanian Family Health Initiative (RFHI), a bilateral, USAID-funded, project implemented by JSI Research and Training Institute, Inc. The RFHI is designed to increase the availability and utilization of high quality client-oriented services at the primary health care level, and to assure sustainability of reproductive health services in Romania. In addition to family planning services being expanded, the project also focuses on implementing and strengthening cervical and breast cancer screening, HIV/AIDS and STI referral systems, and domestic violence at the primary health care level.

The ARAS project, “Peer AIDS Prevention Intervention”, began in September 2001 with funding from UNICEF, PHARE, and JSI. The major goal of the project is to work directly with street children through trained peer educators to inform and educate about health, particularly HIV/AIDS and STIs. The peer educators also facilitate the access of the street children to free or low-cost medical services including HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C testing. Additional accomplishments of the Peer AIDS Prevention Intervention have been to create a forum with other NGOs on STIs and family planning among street children, as well as to research the behaviors of street children in the areas of injection drug use,



awareness among street children of the importance of good health and informing them about how and where they can seek friendly medical services.

Mihai is one of 18 peer educators who were trained in February 2002. The peer educators discuss various health topics with those living on the streets including general anatomy of the human body, reproductive health, communicable disease and hygiene, STIs, consequences of drug use, and risk assessment. The peer educators always have condoms in hand, and on specific occasions give toothbrushes and soap. They document the details of each encounter. In return for their service, the peer educators receive monthly allocations of food and hygiene products; much needed items that help them in their transition from life on the streets. There are more than material benefits for their work. As one volunteer stated, “I like this work because it makes me feel useful to people who are in the same situation that I was once in. I know that they lack information and a way to protect themselves so I like to help them. The street children are very curious about health and like to learn about their bodies and HIV/STIs. They want to get tested but many of them still feel like they are not at risk and so it will take time to change their behavior.”

