Meeting Planned on Health Rights and Actions for Street Youth

Approximately 60 to 100 million youths are now living on the streets in urban centers throughout the world, and the number continues to rise. This problem is not unique to the developing world, but it has been exacerbated by the rapid growth of cities there, combined with extreme poverty, breakdown in extended and nuclear families, malnutrition, and poor health status—factors that leave children vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Many young people are forced out of their homes, and leaving becomes an act of self-preservation. However, once on the street, these children not only lack the basic necessities of life but are often victims of further brutalization. In every country, youths on the street face similar problems and situations in their struggle to provide for themselves.

Childhood and adolescence is normally a time of experimentation, exploration, and identity formation. In the uncompromising environment of the streets, this developmental stage, together with perceived invulnerability and a lack of self-esteem, leads youths to engage in behavior that places them at high risk for unwanted pregnancies and a variety of health-related problems, including intravenous drug use, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and HIV infection. In order to support themselves, they may become involved in theft, drug selling, or prostitution.

Some countries and nongovernmental organizations have attempted to respond to the health problems of street youth, and some service and research projects have been conducted. However, there is a great need for the initiation and support of more focused interventions and health care efforts, as well as a forum where these efforts can be systematically examined, expanded, and evaluated for their utility in other places.

On 25 June 1990, the Pan American Health Organization was a major sponsor of the First International Conference on AIDS and Homeless Youth, held in San Francisco, California (U.S.A.). That meeting—the first multidisciplinary international gathering to address the health care of street youth, with specific focus on AIDS—was attended by over 125 experts representing 32 countries. Clinical, policy, research, and social/educational agendas were developed to guide work within the next decade, and several collaborative projects were initiated.

A second meeting is now planned—the "Segundo Encontro Internacional: Meninos/Meninas de Rua, Direitos e Acoes de Saúde" (Second International Meeting: Street Boys and Girls, Rights and Health Actions)—to be held on 3-5 September 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Youth representatives will attend in order to advocate directly for their interests and needs. The meeting will also include medical and health education workshops targeting physicians and health workers attending the XX International Congress of Pediatrics, which will be taking place at the same time in Rio de Janeiro. Organizational sponsors, in addition to PAHO,
include the Brazilian Movimento Nacional de Meninos e Meninas de Rua, Childhope International, the State University of Rio de Janeiro, Street Kids International, UNICEF, and a variety of other national and international organizations.

The meeting will provide a forum to exchange and synthesize information regarding current data and programs being implemented for street youth; identify successful strategies and techniques for addressing the problems of these youths; establish work groups for future coordinated efforts; increase awareness in physicians and other care providers of the primary health needs of street youth and their right to protection from violence and abuse; provide necessary information about STD and HIV risk behaviors, enabling health professionals to educate youth in their countries on prevention techniques; and increase international awareness of and attention to the day-to-day reality of street youths and the financial, social, and institutional hurdles that must be overcome to help them.

The meeting will also seek to underscore some unsettling issues that must be faced immediately by health professionals and others concerned about children. Street youths are increasingly the targets of physical violence. “Street cleaning” campaigns are common in some countries, and youths must be safeguarded from neglect, exploitation, and cruelty. Discrimination against HIV-infected street youth has led to further abuse and oppression, and protection must be guaranteed and enforced. And, throughout this Region, the human potential of these young people must be respected and nurtured, intolerance examined and overcome, and health education and services made available and accessible.

Those interested in attending or giving formal presentations at the meeting in 1992 should contact Dr. Lydia Bond, Health Situation and Trend Assessment Program, PAHO, for more information.

1525 23rd Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037; telephone (202) 861-3490; facsimile (202) 223-5971.

Second Phase of Central American Health Initiative Launched

The Central American nations and the Pan American Health Organization have joined together to embark on the second phase of the Central American Health Initiative. Known as “Health and Peace for Development and Democracy,” this new phase was requested by the Presidents of the Central American countries at their summit meetings in Montelimar, Nicaragua, in April 1990 and Antigua, Guatemala, in June 1990, and was proposed by the Ministers of Health and Directors of social security institutions at the VI Meeting of the Health Sector of Central America (VI RESSCA), held in Belize City in September 1990.