

Research-based online tool empowers Peace Corps work in Africa

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The University of Kansas is partnering with the Peace Corps to provide custom, web-based resources to staff and volunteers in Africa who are working to boost health and development.

The Community Tool Box was pioneered at KU in the 1990s as a free online resource delivering evidence-based guidance in best practices for community building.

"The Community Tool Box is a public service effort at KU that originated more than 20 years ago from a team of researchers who wanted to provide tools for change and community improvement," said Christina Holt, associate director for Community Tool Box Services at KU Work Group, a part of the Department of Applied Behavioral Science and the Schiefelbusch Institute for Life Span Studies. "Those tools have grown incredibly in their reach, and now more than 5.8 million people each year use them, including grassroots community organizers, nonprofits, state and local government organizations, and NGOs."

Holt said Healthy People, the Institute of Medicine, the Medical Reserve Corps, the World Health Organization and others draw upon the Community Tool Box to support the communities they serve.

Now, under the new agreement with the Peace Corps, the KU Work Group team will tailor resources from the Community Tool Box to fit the needs of volunteers working in Africa to combat HIV/AIDS and

advance overall public health. The Peace Corps Community Tool Box also will include resources developed by the Peace Corps itself.

"The Peace Corps' work to adapt the Community Tool Box will be an invaluable experience to the work of volunteers," said Omosalewa Oyelaran, of the Peace Corps Office of Global Health and HIV.

Holt and staff from the KU Work Group prepared Peace Corps' staff who piloted the Peace Corps Community Tool Box training with 36 Peace Corps volunteers and staff working in the 13 countries in Africa most heavily affected by HIV/AIDS.

"When resources were introduced to the Peace Corps attendees, they were asking, 'When can we begin using these resources?' They were very excited," Holt said. "People go into Peace Corps because they want to make a positive difference in world—but that can be challenging. So having access to resources in such conditions is helpful for those working to bring about change."

Holt said the Peace Corps Community Toolbox will support volunteers with research-based knowledge from disciplines such as community development, urban planning, community health and psychology—but in a "distilled," practical form that makes best practices easy to implement in the field.

"It's about helping Peace Corps workers to think critically and engage the community—it's so important to learn from community voices through interviews and focus groups to learn what people feel are critical issues. That creates buy-in," Holt said. "If you come in with your own solution, it's not likely to be too successful."

The Peace Corps champions this approach and hopes the Community Tool Box will help curb the spread of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa.

According to the Peace Corps, that's the world's most affected region, accounting for 70 percent of new HIV infections as recently as 2013.

"Our work in mobilizing communities to action through hands-on, grassroots-driven education and capacity building will be greatly facilitated by this tool, particularly in the work volunteers do in the mitigation of HIV in their communities," said Andrea DeSantis of the Peace Corps.

Provided by University of Kansas

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