



AFRICAN SERVICES

COMMITTEE

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African Services Featured on Voice of America



Story by Adam Phillips, [VOA News](#)

NEW YORK - New York City is home to hundreds of ethnic and immigrant groups from around the world, including Africans. But until recently, the African diaspora lacked a center dedicated to their needs, especially regarding HIV/AIDS prevention, counseling and treatment.

Now, the Harlem-based African Services Committee offers testing and referral services for HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, and various sexually transmitted diseases, along with other immigrant support services specifically geared to New York's African community.

More than 12,000 clients took advantage of the non-profit organization's free or low cost services last year.

The group was founded by Ethiopian refugee Asfaha Hadera in 1981, when there were no services geared to New York's African diaspora.

"It was a response to their need," he said. "As a result, this has become the place where they come and share their experiences."

African Services Featured on Voice of America (cont.)

ASC now offers HIV outreach, education and testing. The program began during the 1980s in response to the AIDS epidemic.

Often still a taboo

HIV/AIDS remains a taboo topic in many parts of Africa, where contracting the virus is often considered shameful. That attitude persists among many African immigrants in New York, said Mulusew Bekele, ASC's programs operations director.

"Until they get comfortable with the services we have, they tend to in a sense self-stigmatize until I sit down and explain to them that we are here to serve, and that the services are confidential," he said.

Bekele said that helping immigrants who are fearful or sick can be often be taxing. "But the most gratifying part is seeing someone come in, thin as a rail and see them over time flourish, gain weight, be confident and see them smile," he said.

Help for Harlem, then the homeland

In 2003, Asfaha Hadera secured a small grant to take African Services Committee to Ethiopia. He opened a clinic in the capital's main open-air market. The facility is staffed by locals but run according to U.S. best practices, including transparency, accountability, and quality service.

"All services [are] in one [place] so that the poor don't have to hustle from one corner to another. Reproductive health is there. Family planning is there. Nutrition is there. Counseling and testing is there, and also treatment," he said.

ASC Program Director in Ethiopia Hana Woldegabriel said her group reaches out directly to clients, most of whom are poor.

"Most them live on the street and most of them are HIV positive... Also, they are kids, HIV positive kids, who have no one. They don't have a father to support them," she said.

'Save a life and save a world'

Today, ASC runs fully equipped clinics in five regions of Ethiopia. Hadera said the clinics are not only a blessing for residents of rural areas where health care is sparse, but also for himself and ASC's growing staff.

"I thought that one person might not make a difference, but the fact that, if you [are] born to it, if you [are] dedicated, if you are focused, if you are responsible, if you manage resources effectively, it comes [down] to the Jewish principle that, 'if you save one life, you are saving the world.'"

ASC's Nutrition Program Celebrates the Heart

Valentine's Day is all about the affairs of the heart, and the African Services' Nutrition Program made that ring even truer during their "Heart Healthy Fair" on Friday, February 21st (held a week late thanks to the crazy and snowy weather patterns in New York).



Over 50 participants attended the event and enjoyed informative stations that included interactive activities on important subjects such as blood pressure, mental health, food choices, and a table providing free blood pressure and glucose screenings. Each participant was given a 'Heart Healthy Passport' that was stamped after visiting each table. Those that successfully visited all the tables were entered into a raffle drawing at the end of the afternoon.



"We look for creative and fun ways to engage our clients on the subject of health and nutrition. By providing interactive and fun activities, the clients have gravitated towards the classes and the information," shared Nutrition Program Coordinator, Melissa Ip.

Nutrition staff and students worked together to prepare an amazing meal including roasted chicken, fresh vegetables, salad, and more!

ASC Celebrates the Heart (cont.)



And of course, staff and clients celebrated Valentine's Day the 'right' way with a little bit of dessert:



Chocolate chip pancakes with bananas, strawberries and a little whipped cream! YUMMY!

The African Services Nutrition Program launched their 'Active Living Initiative' in 2013, and these classes are a part of that campaign. Thus far over 150 have participated in cooking classes, nutrition seminars, and more. We look forward to continuing this program this year and expanding it even further. To learn more about our Active Living Initiative, click [here](#).

Volunteer Spotlight: Karen Latney-Castillo



At the heart of the "service" in African Services Committee are the incredible and special people who dedicate their time, skill and knowledge to provide for those that turn to ASC, day in and day out. One such individual is Karen Latney-Castillo, a real estate loan and IRS Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) coordinator at Lower East Side People's Federal Credit Union (LES People's FCU) who volunteers her time assisting ASC clients with filing their income taxes, and helps immigrant clients obtain their individual taxpayer identification number (ITIN). This may seem like a mundane activity, but for clients who are newly arrived and navigating a complicated immigration, legal and financial system, her assistance is vital in helping our clients settle in and build a life in New York.

"Her assistance has been absolutely vital for clients. Many of them are scared and don't know how to navigate the financial system. She immediately puts clients at ease and makes them feel comfortable," shares Claudette Francois, a Senior Case Manager at African Services. "I am so thankful and proud to have her as a partner with us and our clients."

Starting off in Massachusetts where she first began preparing taxes, Karen later moved to New York where she met someone running the VITA program for LES People's FCU. From there she was introduced to the ITIN acceptance agent program. Following that tax season, she was hired by the Credit Union to do outreach, working with different agencies in need of assistance with filing taxes. One of these agencies included African Services Committee. As Karen shared, "I went to African Services to speak about ITINs and bank accounts, and our relationship has grown from there!"

Karen helps our clients who, because of immigration circumstances, do not have Social Security Numbers. In helping them attain ITINs, it allows them to, for example, receive a mortgage.

"I believe that my task this go round in life is to help as many people as I can with whatever I can. I also believe that I travel the world through the people I meet. I wish I could be more involved," says Karen.

Aside from just assisting with filing taxes and attaining ITINS, Karen's outreach work, as she explains, "spreads the word to those who feel there is nothing for them."

Still in contact with clients that she worked for in 2005, it is Karen's genuine dedication and care that makes her such a valuable member of African Services Committee! We, here at African Services Committee, are lucky to work with Karen and to have her support.

-Asmahan Malow

2014 AIDS Walk is Coming!



Spring is almost here...or at least we hope! That also means it's the season for the New York City AIDS Walk! Each year African Services fields a team to participate in this amazing event, and we raise money for our Ethiopia programs. This year will be no different, and we would love to have your support!

Join us in walking at the event on Sunday, May 18th -- you can join our team as a walker by clicking [here](#)! Can't make it? Consider making a donation on our team page [here](#).

Now let's close our eyes and dream about the warm and Spring-like weather we'll be having as we walk through Central Park and Manhattan for a good cause! Hope to see you out there!

Hallways of ASC: Unbridled Joy

Starting in this edition of the African Services newsletter, we'd like to start sharing some photos -- and the stories behind those photos -- with you, our readers.



Supervising Attorney, Kate Webster, smiles with Joy Star, a client from Nigeria, who after 4 years finally received her Green Card. We were there to capture the moment as both Joy and Kate's happiness and excitement show in this beautiful photo.

Fun in the City

Stephanie Kaplan, Communications Director recommends...



Target Free Sunday | Hands On: Stream of Consciousness Drawings

Artist J.B. Murray, whose work is on view in *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South*, began making art in his 70's, motivated by divine inspiration. What inspires you to create art?

Join a teaching artist for this drawing workshop and tap into your subconscious to see how your ideas and inspirations land on paper.

Thanks to the generous support of Target, Museum admission is **FREE every Sunday**

. Target Free Sundays reflects a shared commitment to engage the community and offer a vital cultural experience to all.

When: Sunday, March 31st, 2014, 2 pm - 4 pm

Where:

Studio Museum Harlem, 144 West 125th Street, Harlem

For more information, visit their website [here](#).

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