

Social Work Students Work in Africa

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Annemarie Haydel newwave@tulane.edu

Four students in the Tulane School of Social Work worked in Ethiopia this fall as part of the school's first international field placement on the African continent.



Marakie Tesfaye, a master of social work candidate from Atlanta who is graduating this December, works with children in an Ethiopian village as part of her international field placement. (Photo provided by the School of Social Work)

Students Paul Groch, Aimee Lyons, Eddie May and Marakie Tesfaye joined the Ethiopian Children's Fund and coordinated HIV/AIDS awareness and life skills programs for Ethiopian students from age 12 to 17.

Their work focused on the Ethiopian village of Aleltu, located about 34 miles from the capital city, Addis Ababa, in a rural region where families are struggling with issues related to poverty and in particular with the extended illness and loss of community members afflicted with AIDS.

In Ethiopia the current HIV infection rate is estimated at 2.8 million, and there are an estimated 1.1 million AIDS orphans.

Upon arriving in Ethiopia, the Tulane students' first task was to conduct a detailed needs assessment study to guide development and implementation of programs in the village.

"The needs assessment looks at HIV/AIDS knowledge, risk behaviors and cultural barriers to HIV prevention," said Stephanie Baus, School of Social Work faculty project adviser for the group's research work. "The students used multiple methods of data collection, including a structured interview adapted from one developed by the Population Council, a non-governmental organization based in New York City, as well as focus groups with youths and parents and interviews with key informants in the community."

The knowledge the students gain from the needs assessment will be used to enhance the quality of the program and its appropriateness to the community that is being served.

"We will implement a holistic HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention program addressing several

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specific issues — reproductive health, HIV/AIDS prevention, self-esteem building, community building, grief and loss,” May said.

According to May, the goal is to establish several grief and loss groups for adolescent youth of the village who have lost relatives or friends to AIDS, focusing on resiliency-building, coping skills and narrative techniques that will allow the children to share their stories with one another in a safe and healing space.

Eileen Ihrig, director of international programs at the School of Social Work, said this group of students should be very successful in this first-of-its kind internship placement.

“It's a unique group of students — one student is from Ethiopia, and two have lived there already,” said Ihrig. “All of the students are familiar with the living conditions in Africa. The challenge will be transferring what they have learned as social work students into a different context in a culturally sensitive and effective way.”

Annemarie Haydel is marketing coordinator in the School of Social Work.