

Partnership Forum on HIV/AIDS in the Philippines
(Organized by the Government of Sweden,
Philippine National AIDS Council, the UN Country Team, and ADB)
February 23, 2005, 3:00-4:00 p.m.
Grand Ballroom, Mandarin Oriental Hotel
Makati City

**POLITICAL LEADERS:
THE MOVERS IN HIV/AIDS RESPONSE**
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The great Roman poet Horace has said: “For it is your business when the wall next door catches fire.”

But let us set aside that famous line for a while. Allow me first to bring you some bits of good news.

In Naga, we have no single case of HIV/AIDS since I first became city mayor in 1988. We have no seedy bars within our city boundary. And we have an effective anti-drug enforcement unit that has been successfully neutralizing the otherwise rampant peddling and use of prohibited drugs which is another cause of AIDS infection. In fact, for three consecutive years now, we have been cited as having the most Outstanding Peace and Order Council in the country, city category.

When we first took over city hall in 1988, the first order of business was to clean the city of vice and smut to deliver the message that we were serious in bringing about bringing political and moral reforms to the city.

At first, we employed an iron-hand because we had to contend with hardened and well-connected perpetrators or operators of these illegal activities. But that was meant

to be swift and brief, giving the enemies no chance to lock horns with us. But the more effective and sustaining strategy were to bring the people and all the community's stakeholders behind city hall. Thus, henceforth we solve problems through participatory dialogues and engagement.

No sooner had we realized that a sense of ownership was building up among our people where institutional frameworks were established within which the response to such initiatives will operate and sustain itself.

We came up with various innovations and initiatives where stakeholders were always part and parcel of policy-making and implementation process. Thus, in our city was born the People Power Ordinance. Over the years, it has proven that effective city management is compatible with yielding power to the people.

We ventured to solve other pressing problems such as providing homeless families with homelots of their own. We established more day-care centers and added more high schools in the barangays. We set up a dependable 24-hour emergency response service. We built a city hospital for poor and low-income citizens and re-invented the city health office that efficiently delivers services like an expanded private clinic.

We launched programs and projects that cover the various sectors of the community, including the handicapped and the special children --- drawing our people into civic action on a daily basis. We were, in fact, teaching civic education hands on, where the most vital message is: Everyone in the city can make a difference because everyone is important, everyone counts, and everyone is needed.

The people therefore understand that governance is a shared responsibility of public officials and the citizenry, with government providing the tools the people need for their meaningful participation and active engagement.

With this background on how we get things done and shape the future of city, may I now proceed with the topic for which we have been invited to discuss today.

While it is true that in Naga we have no reported case of the dreaded Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), there have been fifteen (15) documented cases of AIDS victims in Bicol to which Naga belong. Seven of these cases were reported in Legazpi City and Albay, while the rest were traced in at least 4 of the 5 other remaining provinces in Bicol. It is feared that at least 7 of the victims may have already died and the remaining 7, God help them, are in their worse stage.

Indeed, Naga cannot afford to be complacent especially that some of its neighbors have caught fire, so to speak.

While Naga is a relatively small city with a population of 147,000, it is a highly evolving urban center.

As a commercial hub, Naga receives hundreds of transient businessmen and tourists daily. We periodically host national and even international conferences and seminars. Every September, Naga bursts with hundreds of thousands and even over a million visitors for the traditional Peñafrancia fiesta.

While we have driven nightclubs outside of the city perimeters, and there is absence of the so-called red light district, guest relations officers, particularly the transient commercial sex workers, cannot be totally barred from roaming our hotels and videoke bars, especially during special events where there are abnormally huge number of visitors and guests.

We have to conduct spot inspections to flush out GROs with no yellow cards, especially upon information that ambulant sex workers have again invaded the city.

In short, the threat of AIDS/HIV infection is always there, 24-hours a day where no one can afford to let his guards down.

As early as two years ago, we created the Naga City STD/AIDS Council that provides multi-pronged tasks in the prevention and control of the disease while promoting healthy civic education and responsible reproduction health program among the citizens and concerned government instrumentalities, including the police.

We also invested substantially in a parallel campaign to neutralize drug and substance abuse --- another cause of AIDS/HIV.

What makes our local AIDS council doubly significant is that unlike similar councils in other LGUs in the country, the Naga City AIDS Council has priests and nuns among its members. We have always sought the widest participation and support in our undertakings.

According to a report by the POLICY Project of the DILG and the USAID which is in the forefront of preventing and monitoring AIDS incidence in the country, the church is seldom involved in initiatives that aim to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. Which is quite understandable, they said, because the Church and HIV/AIDS prevention advocates have not always seen eye-to-eye about the known modes of HIV transmission, such as the use of condom in any sexual intercourse.

With the Church membership in the Naga City AIDS Council, we were able to gain access to school-based youth and get their support in our various HIV prevention programs.

Their membership also gives us a high degree of credibility that allows our council to conduct education and information campaigns in schools and colleges. Incidentally,

two of the three biggest universities in Naga are run by the Jesuits and the Daughters of Charity, namely, the Ateneo de Naga and the Universidad de Sta. Isabel, respectively. In effect, more young citizens have become aware of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Our City Health Office, which is among the most dynamic and awarded health offices in the country, employs a pro-active stance in the campaign against HIV/AIDS. It has two main tasks: (a) Advocacy/Information Dissemination, and (b) Monitoring/Surveillance.

We always maintain that advocacy work on HIV/AIDS is anchored on the principle that HIV/AIDS is not only a health concern but also an issue of governance. Our partnership-driven governance, nurtured by people's high confidence and trust on its leaders, therefore put into action the various civic organizations, health centers, law enforcement agencies, business establishments, a credible media, night establishments, the academe -- and as I have mentioned -- the church, in our fight against AIDS infection.

Nothing can beat where almost everyone is deeply involved and made aware in the common campaign to keep HIV/AIDS out of Naga.

Nothing can beat an LGU where people's trust and confidence on its leaders are high.

Even without AIDS, we in the process keep in check the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, and on a higher plain, help enrich the moral integrity and sexual practices of our people.

For good measure, the Naga City AIDS Council, with the active collaboration of the City Health Office, has been performing the following salient tasks:

- Conduct mandatory seminars among operators and/or managers, entertainers, masseuse and masseurs of barber shops and massage clinics regarding STD/HIV/AIDS prevention measures, otherwise no permit to operate shall be granted to these establishments;
- All registered entertainment establishments are required to have at least one (1) peer educator who shall be responsible to the Council in echoing the seminars he attended or instructions conveyed;
- The Reproductive Health Clinic, as an attached agency of the Council, conducts compulsory weekly medical check-up (gram straining) among guest relations officers, entertainers and masseurs and others with similar occupation.
- The City Health Office, as member of the council, maintains a roster of entertainers/employees indicating their ages and place of employment, which list should be updated every quarter.
- The Council, through the City Health Office, monitors STD/AIDS cases through passive and active surveillance. Active surveillance includes conduct of yearly serological and behavioral surveillance among the persons with high risk sexual behavior or those who by nature of their work are prone to contacting sexually transmitted diseases.
- The City Health Office pursues contact tracing and all other related health intelligence activities; provided that such action shall not contravene the general purposes of R.A. 8504, or the Philippine AIDS Prevention and Control Act. Provided, further that any information gathered shall remain confidential and classified, and can only be used for statistical and monitoring purposes, and not as basis or qualification for employment, school attendance, freedom

of abode and right to travel. While prostitution remains to be an illegal activity, it helps that the City Health Officer knows by their first names all the pimps in the city. In the event of incidence, monitoring and tracking of a suspected carrier will be fast and easier.

- Apart from our AIDS hotline, citizen informants may directly text the city mayor whose number is regularly aired by local radio stations, or relay his information through our Text-Naga or the *naga.gov.ph* website.

As in other successful initiatives of the city, we make sure that our campaign against HIV/AIDS must be carried out in the context of program and resource sustainability.

We always maintain that sustainability must go beyond program effectiveness and resource viability. It should be about personal ownership by the people who are directly involved in the response. As mentioned earlier, it pays that we have strong participatory governance where the citizens are both players and beneficiaries. The inclusion of individuals and the community in government undertaking promotes long-term sustainability by generating broad-based stakeholdership and community ownership over local undertakings. Government must know when to lead and when to be led. We are proud to say that what Naga City is today is a result of a geometric rather than an arithmetic progression. What it is now is not only the sum total of what its people has become; rather, it is the product of what its people have contributed to development.

It is not so much that we only move because our neighbor's house is on fire. Our unwavering concern is to make everyone's home safe and strong to make life better for everyone. Through our unrelenting information campaign, for instance, we have succeeded in telling our people that incidence of AIDS infection, if not immediately reported, can be many times deadlier than a conflagration.

We do know that at the end of the day we can only do so much. Our ultimate success hinges people who we care for, cares for others as well. This is Naga City. This is our story.

Thank you.