Network Support Agents (NSAs) are people openly living with HIV identified in their communities to help strengthen the linkages and referral system between communities and health facilities. NSAs are trained by the International HIV/AIDS Alliance (IHAA), under their PLHIV Project. NSAs lead by example, encouraging disclosure, HIV/AIDS testing, drug adherence and positive living. They routinely provide counseling services and follow-up support to people on antiretroviral treatment.

In Early March 2008, NuLife–Food and Nutrition Interventions for Uganda entered into a strategic collaboration with IHAA to support the introduction of nutrition into ongoing NSA training. Over a six month period of time, 963 NSAs in 32 districts in Eastern, Central and Western Uganda were oriented by NuLife’s community mobilization teams on food and nutrition basics, as well as infant and young child feeding in the context of HIV.

Two community volunteers recently shared how their newly acquired nutrition knowledge has empowered them to change their own dietary practices and to reach out to other PLHIV in their communities, addressing issues of food security, infant feeding, handling medication side affects, and treating malnutrition. They spoke confidently about their answers to questions commonly asked.

Robert’s story

Dumba Robert is a middle aged man in his fifties, married with two children aged 15 and 19, and a resident of Wampamba zone in Wobulenzi Town Council, Luwero District. Robert is a Network Support Agent trained by the International HIV/AIDS Alliance. He is attached to Kikoma Health Centre and is enthusiastic about his role of helping his community and leading by example. From his experience, behavior change comes faster if people see you practicing what you preach. In line with this belief, Robert routinely takes his ARVs, uses condoms to avoid re-infection and states that following his NSA training, newly armed with nutrition information, he began to boost his personal immunity by eating a more diverse and balanced diet, always including green leafy vegetables and fruits rich in Vitamin A and C.

Equipped with a small nutrition book (provided by the Ministry of Health through NuLife) entitled “Improving the Quality of Life through Nutrition,” Robert shares what he has learned with other PLHIV and the people who care for them. He highlighted several positive experiences and asked NuLife for additional training, materials written in local languages, and visual counseling materials for people who cannot read.

Robert proudly displays the nutrition book, provided during the NuLife Food and Nutrition Basics Training, that he routinely uses in educating PLHIV in his community.

In Robert’s own words: “Thank you, NuLife and HIV/AIDS Alliance, for empowering us to help our communities in the fight against AIDS…”

“Thank you, NuLife and HIV/AIDS Alliance, for empowering us to help our communities in the fight against AIDS…”
Annet’s story

Namatovu Annet, a female of 26 years and mother of two boys, aged 8 and 14, resides in Bukuma Village in the outskirts Luwero Town Council in the former Luwero Triangle where the NRA staged a five-year guerrilla war. Annet is energetic and very hopeful about the future. She is an active member of Young Positives Ambassadors, a community based HIV/AIDS organization in a tripartite working arrangement with NACWOLA and International HIV/AIDS Alliance. Annet is dedicated to helping other families in her village, and regularly conducts home visits to educate, counsel and refer PLHIV in need of professional care to Kasana Health Centre IV, a government run facility. Thanks to her own timely, care seeking and adherence to treatment her doctors have found that she is not yet eligible for ARVs, but receives septrine to fight opportunistic infections.

Annet recently participated in a nutrition orientation meeting organized by Gladys Bambola, a community trainer working with the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, who was recently trained by NuLife in food and nutrition basics and infant feeding in the context of HIV several months ago. During the recent interview, Annet reported that better nutrition had dramatically improved her health status, and reflected on some of the food and nutrition issues that she currently faces in her community work. According to Annet, poor feeding practices are a big challenge among PLHIV because the virus “eats away body nutrients and weakens the body defense system.” Even when PLHIV have food, they often lack knowledge about how best to combine or prepare foods. Others, because of depression, resort to drinking alcohol, worsening their immunity and deteriorating their health. Mothers who are HIV-positive are facing many problems related to choosing the best feeding options for their children. Those who choose not to breastfeed are finding it difficult to sustain because they don’t have enough money to buy formula and face issues of stigma, especially from grandmothers, for positive mothers.

In Annet’s own words: “Gladys’ training has made me appreciate the benefits of nutrition. I have personally improved my diet and whenever I go out on home visits, I encourage clients, especially those on ARVs, to improve their diets, as well. I advise them to eat lots of fruits and vegetables to improve their immunity and encourage them to drink lots of water, eat fermented porridge and many regular small meals (snacks) to regain their lost energy.”

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NuLife - Food and Nutrition Interventions for Uganda, is a technical assistance program to support improved health and nutrition outcomes for people living with HIV/AIDS in Uganda. This program is managed by University Research Co., LLC (URC) in collaboration with Save the Children, and ACDI/VOCA. The project is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), under Cooperative Agreement No. 617-A-00-08-00006-00.