Community Mental Health Programme

UNRWA’s Community Mental Health Programme (CMHP) was established in 2002 to assist Palestine refugees in the Gaza Strip who had lost their ability to cope with the deteriorating conditions characterised by high levels of violence and economic decline. With a particular focus on children and youth, CMHP helps to mitigate the psychological impact resulting from the prevailing violence, economic hardship and isolation of the Gaza refugee population.

**Approach**

Through 186 specially recruited and trained counsellors based in schools, health centres and social service centres, CMHP encourages the development of constructive coping strategies and promotes mental well-being. The programme also enables the vulnerable refugee population to make a positive contribution to the development of their communities.

The majority of counsellors serve in UNRWA schools to assist refugee students cope with stressful living conditions. In Gaza, the environment invokes a variety of mental health problems, particularly in children. These problems include: lack or absence of motivation in school, fear, sleeplessness and inability to concentrate. The CMHP focuses on promoting the mental health of all students and involving the community and teachers to address these behavioural issues. Children are given space to express their suffering and receive the support of counsellors as well as peers.

School counsellors use a variety of approaches to help children and their families cope with the stressful environment of the Gaza Strip. These methods include drama techniques, behavioural techniques, simplified cognitive techniques and self-care practices.

**Activities**

Gaza based research has indicated that a majority of Palestinian children report symptoms of distress. In order to address this distress, mental health counsellors are based in schools to provide children with basic life skills, such as appropriate forms of communication, stress coping mechanisms and self-confidence building exercises. These structured exercises and drawing activities endeavour to provide pupils with the necessary tools to live a normal life in challenging conditions.

Counsellors working in health centres provide psycho-education and assist in managing the treatment of chronically-ill patients through lifestyle modifications. Mothers receive educational sessions on managing stressed children and healthy child-rearing practices. Chronic psychiatric patients who are registered at health centres benefit from family counselling programmes in which caregivers are provided with the necessary knowledge to assist in the recovery process.

The CMHP also supervised and contributed to training health staff on gender based and domestic violence. Community mental health counsellors also work closely with community based organisations on gender and child protection matters. These counsellors conduct awareness sessions and empower the community with tools to overcome a stressful environment.

The programme expanded its work further in 2008 in order to support a number of Gaza Field’s key initiatives. As part of the Field’s emphasis to help children with special learning needs, CMHP counsellors carried out a comprehensive assessment of each child who did not pass Summer Learning examinations to find solutions to help these children reach their potential.

CMHP staff have also been instrumental in the Field’s initiative to end violence in UNRWA schools. In conjunction with the Education Department and protection experts, including Save the Children Sweden, senior CMHP staff have contributed to the Respect and Discipline in Violence Free Schools Initiative, which is being piloted in 20 UNRWA schools.

CMHP worked closely with UNICEF to develop a tool to assess the needs and evaluate the impact of different types of mental health interventions on children in Gaza and is involved in the national mental health plan to develop a mental health act and integrate mental health in Primary Health Care (PHC). This will be done by improved training of health staff and setting up a referral system between PHC centres and mental health services.

About UNRWA

UNRWA provides education, healthcare, relief and social services, micro-credit loans and emergency aid to more than 4.4 million Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. UNRWA employs more than 28,000 staff, the vast majority of whom are Palestine refugees, including 20,000 educational staff and 4,000 health workers.

UNRWA Gaza Field Office, PO Box 61, Gaza City www.unrwa.org Tel: +972 (0)8 282-4508 / +972 (0)8 677-7333 Fax: +972 (0)8 677-7444