Indonesian Red Cross Society – Solo City Branch
Volunteers Support Mental Illness Patients at Red Cross Caring House

LOCATION: Solo City is a branch of Indonesian Red Cross or Palang Merah Indonesia (PMI). Located in Central Java Province, 585 kilometres east of Jakarta, capital city of Indonesia, it takes about one-hour flight from Jakarta to Solo. The city has total area of 44 km², has five sub-districts, and home to almost 500 thousand inhabitants (2010 census). The Solo City Red Cross branch is acknowledged by local authorities and public for their emergency responses, community health and social service, blood donation management and risk reduction programme through the works of 9,390 volunteers and 6,350 youth members.

THE ISSUE
The increasing number of people with mental illness has been a serious problem of Central Java Province. Based on Provincial Health office data, in 2013 there were 121,962 mental illness patients which increased in 2014 and 2015 becoming 260,247 and 317,504 respectively. In Solo City, data showed that 760 people have severe mental problem while another 1,335 have light mental problems. Many of them are abandoned, live in streets and public areas with no one taking care of them. The local authority revealed that most of these persons come from neighbouring cities or districts. This raises social problems while the government has been overwhelmed to tackle the situation since there is only one mental hospital in the city.

PMI Solo City Branch identified this as an area where Red Cross can contribute. In 2012, Red Cross built and officially operated “Griya Peduli PMI” (Indonesian Red Cross/PMI Caring House) to accommodate and to take care of abandoned mental illness patients.

In collaboration with the local authorities, any person with mental problem found in the streets and public places in Solo City will be brought to the Red Cross Caring House for treatment and support.

The activities in the Caring House include basic health services, provision of appropriate clothes and meals, and some treatment agenda.

With only 17 personnel consisting of eight medical experts and nine non-medical staff, the works are clearly very difficult. Likewise, in treating the patients, Red Cross realize that the patients need support not only on health services to improve their condition but also on communication and interaction with people to foster their mental recovery.

ACTIONS TAKEN
To tackle the above challenges, PMI Solo City branch created a visit and involvement programme for local volunteers (including Youth) and public to participate in activities supporting the patients on a daily basis.
HOW DID THEY DO IT?

PMI Solo City started the service of Caring House in 2012. Every time PMI Solo City received information about abandoned people with mental illness found in the street, they will immediately send a car along with assigned volunteers to pick up the person to bring to the Caring House. In this place, patients will be treated appropriately with no discrimination as to their gender, social status, race, or religious beliefs. Many of them even do not remember their families.

PMI Solo City deploy 135 volunteers in average per month (60% of them are female and 40% are male) to assist Caring House’s team. Volunteers who want to spend their time working with the patients can contact the Caring House Management to schedule their time availability.

Especially for volunteers who are based at branch office, the Red Cross office have set up a monthly schedule to manage volunteers’ assignment. Usually they work in a group (2-10 persons) under supervision of Caring House management team. If the number of volunteers are more than needed, the management will develop a schedule with three shifts (morning, afternoon, evening).

Before involving with the patients, the management gives a briefing to volunteers about the condition, areas that they can explore, and some issues that need to be aware of (e.g. there are patients who are still mentally unstable and can only receive treatment from medical expert).

The Caring House provides various tasks to do for volunteers. They can help patients having their bath, checking daily health including nail and hair cutting, cooking, providing meals package, cleaning the rooms, teaching people with skill on handicraft production, and organizing some psychosocial support activities (physical exercise, competition, singing, etc.).

“The first thing volunteers express to us after their assignment is how grateful with what they have now, given the condition they see from the patients,” says Tri Wuryanto, head of PMI Solo City office. “Working with the patients with mental illness”, says Tri, “gives volunteers much better understanding about the need to help vulnerable and abandoned people. They learn about cultivating empathy to others who need help.”

OUTCOME

Since 2012 when the programme was launched, 511 persons with mental problem have been treated and taken care in Solo City Red Cross Caring House. From that number, 214 of them successfully recovered and are back to their families.

Today, 119 persons still stay and receive treatment and support from Solo City Red Cross. One of key success factors of this Caring House is the role of volunteers who helped the Caring House management team in doing daily treatment to the patients.

LESSON LEARNED

1. For Caring House management team, the burden have been reduced as Red Cross volunteers assist them in the daily tasks.
2. For patients, the presence of people from outside who take care of them and are willing to communicate with them fostered faster mental recovery process back to normal life.
3. For volunteers, they learn hands-on implementation of the Seven Fundamental Principles and a deeper understanding of socially inclusive actions.

This story is available at https://fednet.ifrc.org/en/resources/youth-and-volunteering/volunteering/resources/volunteering-solutions-bank/