

Driving to safety: Utsav for truckers raises HIV awareness



At the Truckers' Utsav ahead of World AIDS Day in the city
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THE Transport Corporation of India Foundation (TCIF), the social arm of the Transport Corporation of India, organised the fifth nationwide "Truckers' Utsav" ahead of World AIDS Day at 15 locations across the country on Sunday.

The event was aimed at creating awareness among truckers on the prevention of HIV/AIDS through concerts, street plays, song and dance performances and quizzes.

"The event is an annual feature that provides a platform to bring thousands of truck drivers together to create awareness on the prevention of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases in an interesting and entertaining manner. Owing to the nature of their job, truck drivers have to travel long distances and stay away from their families for long durations, and are found to be the group most vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases," Shekhar Setu, project director for TCIF, said. "The initiative is targeted at taking

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The Utsav had various multi-speciality health camps and parallel competitive events like arm-wrestling, bucket-lifting and singing contests, apart from the best maintained truck contest.

India has around five million truck drivers, with around 2 million of them travelling on long haul routes. Being sexually active, the community is found to be a very high-risk group, and also suffers from low self-esteem and social stigma.

The overall prevalence of HIV/AIDS among long-distance truckers is reported to be 4.6 percent, as compared to 0.36 percent among the general population, the organisers said.

The initiative, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, aims to implement a comprehensive integrated package on treatment for sexually transmitted infections, behaviour change communications, condom promotion and counselling among truck drivers through strategically located interventions at major halt points in nine states along national highways across the country.

"The programme has made us conscious of the disease and preventive care that needs to be taken. There are practical problems and challenges in our job — this initiative realistically addresses those issues," said Om Prakash, a truck driver who attended the event at Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar.

Organisers of the event told *Newsline* that considering the increased use of condoms and detection of cases, it can be hoped that not only have awareness levels gone up, but the spread of the disease is also being checked.