

Introducing a comprehensive approach to implementing, scaling up, and strengthening HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) service delivery in Ukraine

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Background

Ukraine has the second highest HIV prevalence in Europe and Central Asia, with more than 250,000 people living with HIV (PLHIV). Parenteral transmission associated with injection drug use was the main mode of HIV transmission from 1995, but since 2008 sexual transmission has been driving the HIV epidemic in Ukraine. In 2020, heterosexual transmission accounted for 61.2% of cases, and homosexual transmission for 2.5% of cases.

The WHO recommends the use of antiretroviral drugs by HIV-negative individuals to reduce HIV acquisition. In 2018, Ukraine adopted this recommendation by launching PrEP on a limited scale, with a primary focus of reaching men who have sex with men (MSM). Ukraine's national goal for 2019-2023 is to cover 10% of key populations, or >60,000 people, with PrEP services, including people who inject drugs, MSM, sex workers, and partners of PLHIV. In 2019, only 1,735 individuals received PrEP in Ukraine.

Figure 1. I-TECH PrEP Program priority regions of Ukraine (October 2020 to September 2021)

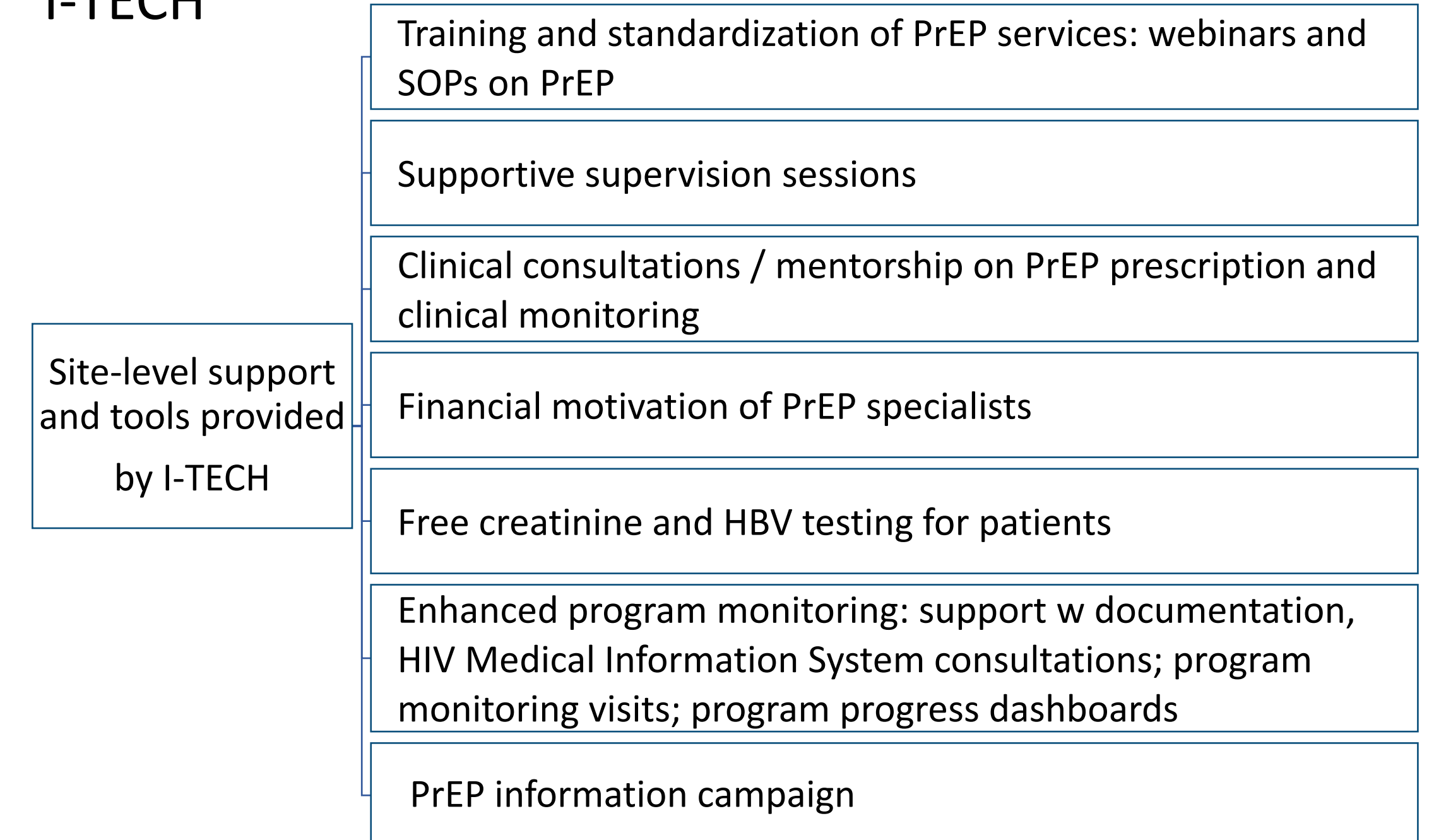


The International Training and Education Center for Health (I-TECH) began working in Ukraine in 2011 at the invitation of the Ukrainian Ministry of Health. I-TECH supports the Government of Ukraine in implementing reforms in health services management and continuing professional education to improve health services for people living with HIV and achieve the UNAIDS 95-95-95 goals. From October 2020 to September 2021, I-TECH focused its efforts on advancing high-quality PrEP services in 11 PEPFAR priority regions of Ukraine (Figure 1).

Description

To scale up and strengthen PrEP delivery in Ukraine, the I-TECH initiated a technical assistance program for PrEP. The program established PrEP provision as a standard of care in 39 public-sector healthcare facilities (HCFs). Key PrEP program elements are listed in Figure 2. Baseline needs assessment showed a lack of standardization in PrEP provision and demand for comprehensive PrEP training among healthcare workers (HCWs). I-TECH developed guidelines for daily and event-driven PrEP delivery and conducted two training sessions for HCWs. PrEP clients in the program received free creatinine and HBV testing. I-TECH also supported PrEP information campaign.

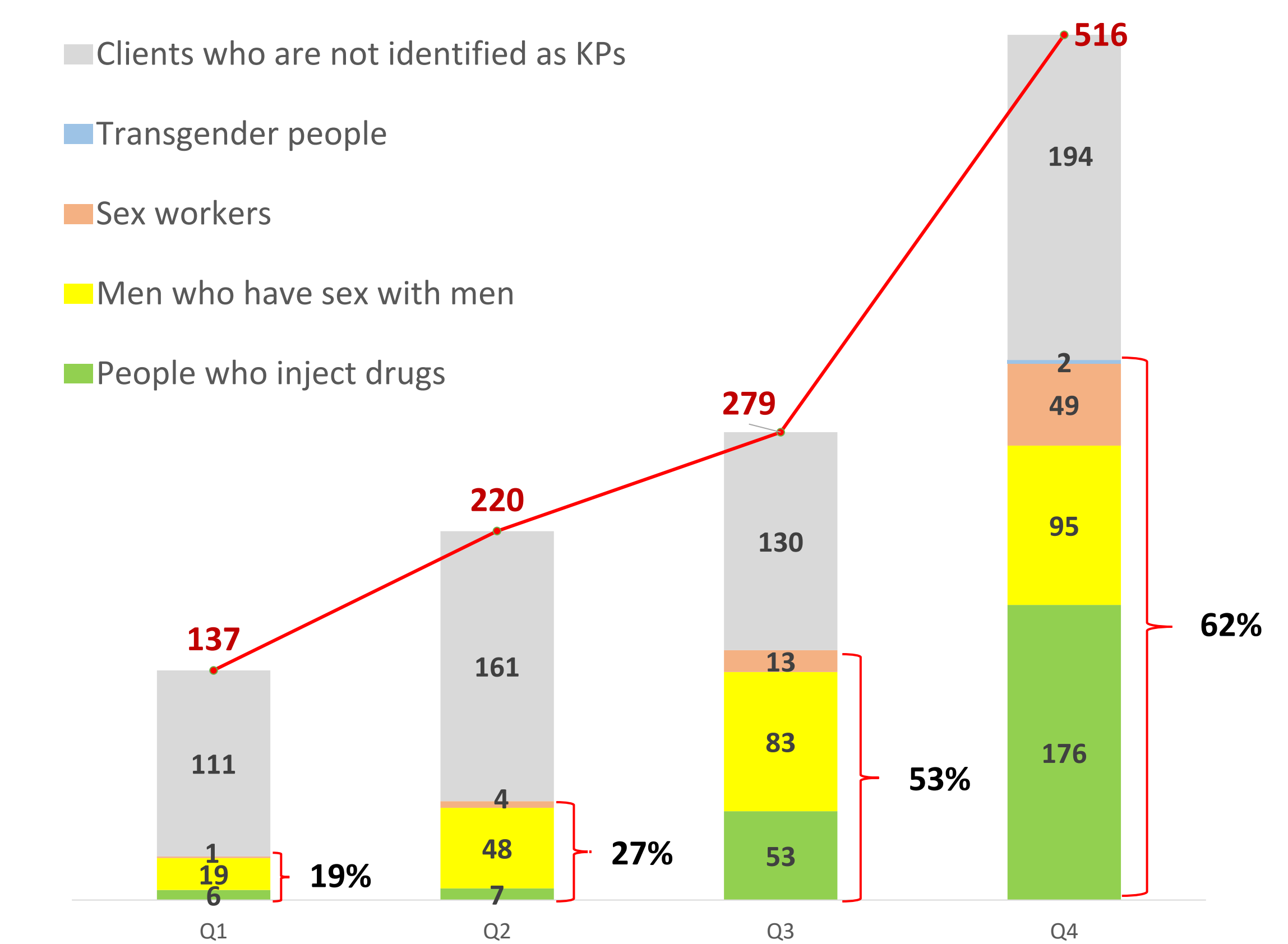
Figure 2. Key elements of PrEP Program implemented by I-TECH



Lessons learned

From October 2020 to September 2021, 39 HCFs were engaged in the PrEP program, including 19 clinics new to PrEP delivery. During the program year, 1,540 clients received PrEP at least once, exceeding the anticipated annual client target (n=891). Two-thirds were males in their thirties. In total, 1,152 ART-naïve clients started PrEP during the program year, out of them 39% (n=451) were referred from the I-TECH-supported HIV assisted partner testing program implemented at participating clinics. Participation of key populations increased by 43.4%, from 19.0% of all PrEP clients in Q1 to 62.4% in Q4 (95% confidence interval: 35.6% - 51.2% increase; p<0.0001 based on Chi-2 test of equality of proportions) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Quarterly results on enrolling new clients and coverage of key populations over first year of PrEP program span in 39 public-sector HCFs



Conclusions/next steps

The first-year program results demonstrated increasing demand for PrEP among clients of public-sector HCFs, and a scalable model for dissemination of guidelines, training of HCWs and monitoring and evaluation of the PrEP program. The program also identified positive synergies with the HIV assisted partner testing initiative in engaging new PrEP clients. In 2021-2022, I-TECH is expanding its technical assistance to 106 ART sites in 12 PEPFAR priority regions of Ukraine to increase scaled access to PrEP services for at least 5,893 clients. Even in the context of war and continued assault of Russian troops, the PrEP Program continues to be actively implemented, including in the temporarily occupied territories and in regions under fire.



The program activities on which this abstract is based were supported by the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Office of Global Health, under the terms of cooperative agreement U91HA06801 to the International Training and Education Center for Health, Department of Global Health, University of Washington.