

Ghana: PrEP demand creation provides gateway to other HIV services

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EPC181

BACKGROUND

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) was implemented for the first time in Ghana through the Key Population Investment Fund (KPIF) of the Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project, which is funded by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and led by FHI 360. The purpose of the program was to initiate men who have sex with men (MSM), female sex workers (FSWs), and transgender people — all key populations (KP) for HIV prevention — on PrEP to reduce HIV acquisition.

DESCRIPTION

PrEP was implemented in six health facilities in the Greater Accra and Ashanti regions from October 2020 to September 2021. KP-led community-based organizations utilized social media and online networks to conduct demand creation activities and were not physically present in hot spots or other gathering places. Once clients were reached through social media, peer educators referred them for eligibility screening at a facility or mobile clinic. HIV testing was provided for the first time during the screening process. Screening included a behavioral risk assessment, an HIV test, and a review of possible acute infection or recent exposure to HIV. If an individual had a recent HIV exposure, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) was recommended. We reviewed the PrEP screening through initiation cascade and used a chi-square test to determine if there were differences in PrEP eligibility between FSWs and MSM/trans people.



PrEP community service delivery using the WAAF-International Health Care Center mobile clinic, 2022

LESSONS LEARNED

Demand for PrEP was high among all KPs (Table 1); however, compared to FSWs, a higher portion of MSM and trans people were not able to start PrEP because they were HIV positive or met other ineligibility criteria (Table 1). A chi-square test of independence showed that KP type was associated with PrEP eligibility ($p < .001$).

From October 2020 through March 2022, about 10.5 percent ($n=86$) of MSM and trans people and 2.4 percent ($n=26$) of FSWs screened ineligible for PrEP because they tested HIV positive during screening and needed antiretroviral therapy (ART) or had recently been exposed to HIV and were initiated on PEP (3 FSWs and 19 MSM/trans people). This finding could demonstrate that MSM who were more likely to test HIV positive were coming for PrEP when they might not otherwise seek HIV services (Table 1). The rates of case finding through PrEP services were 11.3 percent for MSM and trans people and 0.9 percent for FSWs.

TABLE 1. PrEP cascade: screening to PrEP initiation, October 2020–March 2022

	FSWs	MSM/TG
Screened to PrEP	1,085	816
HIV positive	10	92
Case finding	0.9%	11.3%
Referred/initiated on PEP	3	19
Total ineligible for PrEP (HIV positive or PEP)	26	86
% ineligible	2.4%	10.5%
Eligible for PrEP	1,059	730
Initiated on PrEP	976	717
Chi-square	$p < .001$	

“...I had the plan to prevent myself from HIV/AIDS but did not know how and where to start. I accompanied a friend to take his PrEP medication (refill) from IHCC, WAAF office. At the facility, I was introduced to the case manager and some peers who educated me about PrEP, ART, and HIVST kits. In fact, from my engagement with the peers at WAAF, I got convinced that I was at the right place and at the right time. I instantly got myself tested through the HIVST unassisted method and ... Thank God, with the negative result, I quickly asked the nurse to enroll me on PrEP immediately. Just last week I had a sexual intercourse with a positive client without knowing, but I know I am protected by PrEP, so I do not fear at all. ... It is simply a blessing to have the Epic project running and working with us through all our difficult moments in this country.”

-- MSM and PrEP beneficiary since January 2022

CONCLUSIONS

The high demand for PrEP services among MSM and trans people who were ineligible for PrEP due to being HIV positive or meeting another ineligibility criteria demonstrates the need for expanded HIV prevention services. PrEP offers opportunities to reach individuals who may not otherwise seek services, support HIV prevention among KP individuals at higher likelihood of exposure to the virus, offer PEP to those recently exposed to HIV, and facilitate HIV testing and ART initiation for those newly diagnosed. Expanding HIV services, such as PrEP, for those who have higher rates of exposure could support the achievement of the 95-95-95 goals of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the National AIDS and STIs Control Programme, the Ghana AIDS Commission, and all partner organizations for their immense support and provision of strategic, technical, programmatic, and policy direction to ensure the effective implementation and scale-up of the Ghana PrEP jump-start strategy.

This work was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The contents are the responsibility of the EpiC project and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, PEPFAR, or the United States Government. EpiC is a global cooperative agreement (7200AA19CA00002) led by FHI 360 with core partners Right to Care, Palladium International, and Population Services International (PSI).



Lay counselors deliver PrEP services in the Priorities on Rights and Sexual Health (PORSH) office, 2022