

Transforming social and behavior communication using digital platforms: the case of USSD HIV self-assessment and PrEP adherence support tools



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Country of research: Zambia

Background

In 2018 in Zambia, the JSI-implemented USAID DISCOVER-Health project was one of the first to roll out pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). In Zambia, PrEP is only provided to individuals at substantial risk of HIV, using a paper-based national eligibility screening tool, administered by health care workers (HCWs) during service delivery. In busy clinics, this method can compromise the client's privacy and prove time-consuming for both client and provider.

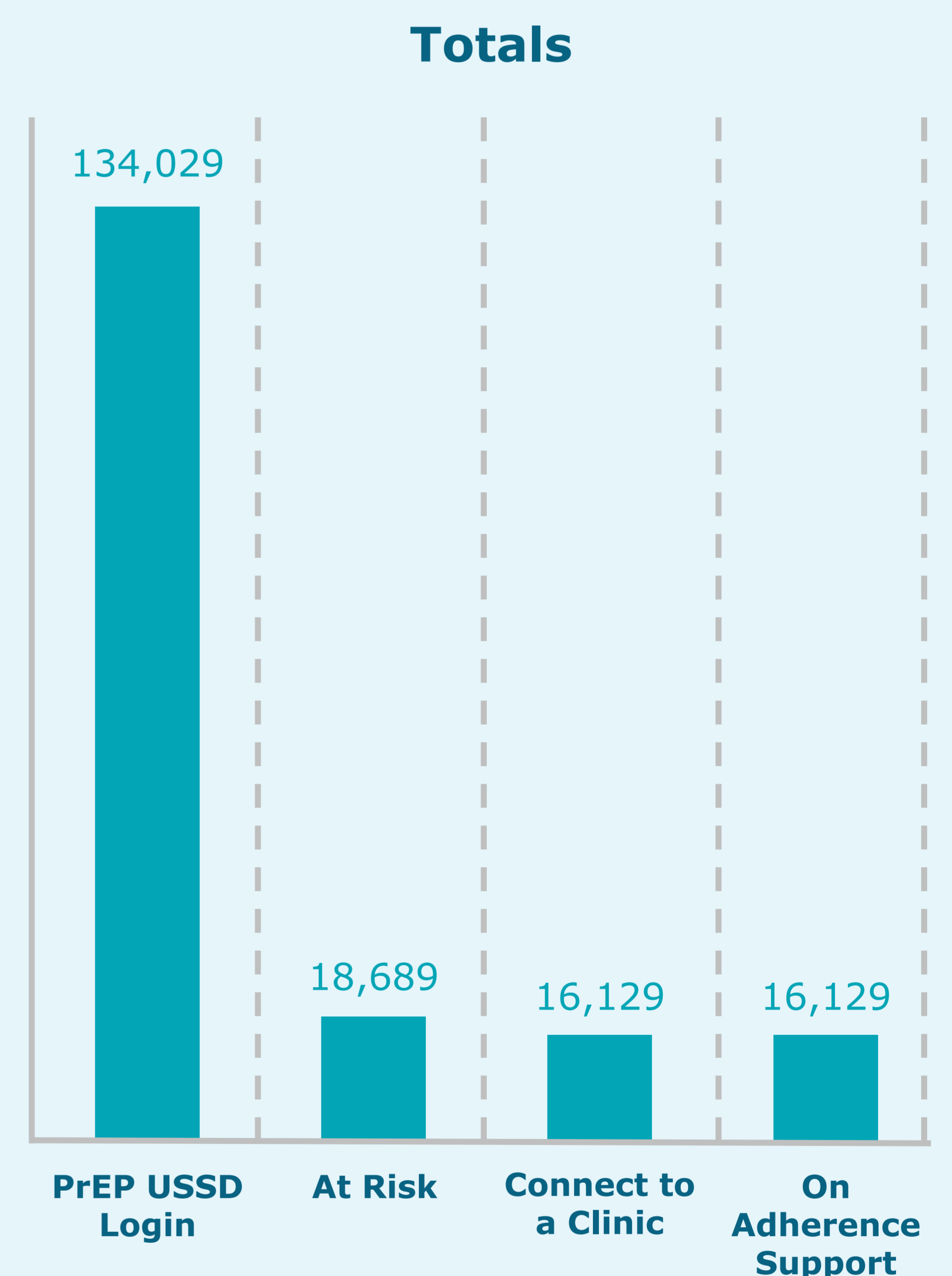
Intervention

In October 2018, the project developed an unstructured supplementary service data (USSD) information management system, accessed through peer-to-peer interaction in social platforms, to support PrEP self-risk assessment and improve linkage to services. Using a mobile phone, clients can access the platform to ascertain their HIV risk level. If a client is at substantial risk, the USSD links them to the nearest PrEP service provider (SP). The SP contacts the client to make an in-person appointment and initiate them on PrEP. Once the client is initiated, the USSD, in combination with SMS, provides the client with PrEP adherence support.

Results

134,029 clients accessed this service between October 2018 and June 2022. Of those, 18,689 were found to be at risk of HIV and were linked to in-person PrEP services. Another 16,129 clients asked to be linked to PrEP clinics, before full completion of the HIV self-risk assessment. Through the USSD, 16,129 clients were linked to PrEP clinics from January to December 2021. During the same period, 16,129 clients used the USSD to access PrEP adherence support.

| Period | PrEP USSD Login | At Risk | Connect to a Clinic | On Adherence Support |
|---------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Oct–Dec 2018 | 1,315 | 43 | 19 | 0 |
| Jan–June 2019 | 23,464 | 3,223 | 2,779 | 2,798 |
| July–Dec 2019 | 60,558 | 9,864 | 9,022 | 9,022 |
| Jan–June 2020 | 7,866 | 871 | 663 | 663 |
| July–Dec 2020 | 8,042 | 716 | 560 | 560 |
| Jan–June 2021 | 5,894 | 355 | 339 | 339 |
| July–Dec 2021 | 21,073 | 3,122 | 2,383 | 2,383 |
| Jan–June 2022 | 5,817 | 495 | 364 | 364 |
| Totals | 134,029 | 18,689 | 16,129 | 16,129 |



Taking this to scale

The project has demonstrated that developing simple digital solutions, such as USSD platforms, can facilitate health service linkage, service provision, and adherence support for clients. The USSD platform provides privacy through the self-risk assessment feature and reduces the initial screening burden on busy HCWs, while significantly increasing access to essential HIV prevention services.