

Primary Health & HIV Care: Ensuring No One is Left Behind in a Post-COVID World

Overview

While the world has made significant progress on HIV/AIDS, too many people affected by HIV face barriers to quality health services that address all of their needs, especially in countries with weak health systems. COVID-19 has made matters worse as the pandemic response has diverted resources for HIV, disrupting essential medical and psychosocial services and potentially causing hundreds of thousands of additional deaths.

Recovering from the pandemic will not only require rapidly scaling up prevention, testing, care and treatment, but also new strategies and partnerships to ensure access to HIV/AIDS services. One important approach is the **integration of HIV services with primary health care** to increase access to people-centered prevention and treatment in local communities. When primary health care works, it can connect all people, including key populations and other marginalized groups, with trusted health workers and supportive systems throughout their lives.

Strong primary health care can reduce barriers to care for people living with and at risk for HIV and deliver comprehensive health services to these individuals sustainably in times of crisis and calm. Investing in better primary health care will provide a foundation for more resilient health systems that leave no one behind.

Key Data Points

- Progress toward ending HIV has stalled: Over the last two years, the annual number of new HIV infections has plateaued at 1.7 million and there has been only a modest reduction in HIV-related deaths. In 2019, 62% of new global

HIV infections were among key populations and their sexual partners. ([WHO 2020](#), [UNAIDS 2020](#))

- Due to COVID-19, 85% of HIV programs across 106 countries surveyed by the Global Fund reported disruption to service delivery (as of June 17, 2020). A six-month interruption to the supply of antiretroviral therapy in sub-Saharan Africa could lead to more than half a million excess deaths from HIV in 2020 alone. ([The Global Fund 2020](#), [HIV Modelling Consortium 2020](#))
- People affected by HIV often face barriers to care, including hard-to-reach clinics, fragmented care for multiple health issues, lack of community-based HIV services, user fees, long wait times and stigma from providers. ([Journal of the International AIDS Society 2016](#))
- Several studies have found that people living with HIV face an increasing burden of infectious and non-communicable diseases, especially in low-income countries. ([UNAIDS 2020](#))
- Systematic and scoping reviews have shown that strong primary health care can effectively serve the most marginalized by providing equitable, accessible and comprehensive care for the majority of health needs - including for opportunistic infections and the growing burden of non-communicable diseases. ([BMJ Global Health 2019](#))
- Integrating HIV care with people-centered primary health care can improve the quality and efficiency of care and reduce stigma without compromising the uptake of services for tuberculosis, HIV, antenatal care and more ([UNAIDS 2017](#))
 - When one study applied a community health approach and integrated HIV into multi-disease service delivery, it led to a range of positive health outcomes: HIV-associated tuberculosis incidence was reduced and hypertension control was improved alongside dramatic increases in HIV service coverage and reductions in HIV incidence and AIDS-related mortality. ([UNAIDS 2020](#))
 - In one clinic in Namibia, a shift towards integrated health service delivery led to a 20% reduction in deaths among people with HIV. ([UNAIDS 2017](#))

Key Messages

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, people affected by HIV faced persistent barriers to accessing comprehensive, quality health services. The pandemic has exacerbated these challenges and compounded barriers to accessing care.

- Due to advances in treatment, HIV is no longer a death sentence. It is a chronic condition - one requiring uninterrupted access to treatment, counselling and other services.
- People living with HIV often have other health needs, including services for TB, family planning or treatment for non-communicable diseases and conditions. A lack of integrated services means that patients who need treatment for multiple health issues may have to spend additional time, resources and energy accessing care at separate clinics.
- The pandemic has made matters worse, interrupting existing health services and straining primary health systems that were already ill-equipped to care for people living with HIV - especially vulnerable populations facing stigma and discrimination.

Grounding HIV services in people-centered primary health care that is accessible, equitable and comprehensive is an important strategy to ensure people's diverse health needs are met in times of crisis and calm.

- When strong, primary health care can meet the majority of people's health needs, providing care for HIV, maternal health, family planning, TB and AIDS-related infections in one place.
- With a focus on meeting people's holistic needs and involving individuals in their own care, primary health care can be adapted to provide tailored care based on unique preferences and expectations.
- Strong primary health care can continue to provide quality HIV care for people in their communities during crises - through facilities, mobile clinics, telemedicine and more.

As countries respond to and recover from COVID-19, we have an opportunity to create more resilient and effective health systems grounded in strong primary health care.

- Regaining lost progress on HIV brought on by the pandemic will require building effective, equitable health systems with strong primary health care that centers on the needs of the most vulnerable.
- Investing in primary health care that is well-equipped to provide high-quality HIV services and meet individuals' myriad health needs will provide a foundation for more resilient health systems that leave no one behind.
- The HIV and primary health care communities must advocate for stronger primary health care together, uniting behind the shared goal of health for all.

About PHCPI

PHCPI is a partnership dedicated to transforming the global state of primary health care, beginning with better measurement.

While the content in this document represents the position of the partnership as a whole, it does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any partner organization.

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