DAS O'Connell visits PEPFAR
Supported Initiatives

In her first visit to Zimbabwe, the Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) O’Connell toured two sites being supported by the United States President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The first stop was the New Start franchise run by Populations Services International (PSI) with technical support from USAID. Located at the Africa House in Harare, the New Start Center models a one-stop concept that provides numerous services such as HIV testing, antiretroviral therapy, HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis, tuberculosis as well as integrated sexual and reproductive health services. DAS O’Connell witnessed the effectiveness of the self-testing program that has already been credited for increasing the number of people getting tested and most importantly, knowing their HIV status.
O’Connell also visited a government of Zimbabwe supported clinic in Kuwadzana which provides primary healthcare services including HIV counseling and testing; management of opportunistic infections; antiretroviral therapy (OAI/ART) as well as HIV/TB collaborative management. Located in the southern suburbs of the capital city, Harare, the clinic services a catchment area with a total population of 179,558. It is estimated that a third of this population is under the age of 15. Sister Acquiline Magandi thanked PEPFAR for donating a three roomed Porta Cabin through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC/Zimbabwe). The additional space has provided a safe haven for patients testing for HIV. DAS O’Connell expressed appreciation for the wonderful work done by health professionals at the two sites. She further acknowledged the efforts made by various PEPFAR supported partners to provide the most comprehensive care possible. Knowing your HIV status is critical to controlling the epidemic. "We all share responsibility and we hope that whether you are here or wherever you are hearing this message that you go to your local clinic and make sure that you know your status," she said.
PEPFAR supports innovative models for accelerating access to health services

The United States President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) is supporting the implementation of two innovative direct-service delivery (DSD) differentiated models of care. “Differentiated care refers to service delivery models that address the specific requirements of the continuum of prevention, care and treatment for a subgroup of clients,” explains Funmi Adesanya, Deputy to the PEPFAR Coordinator. The models include Community ART Refill Group Support (CARGS) and Community Adolescent Treatment Support (CATS) groups among others. These innovative models are succeeding in identifying hard to reach populations in need of antiretroviral therapy, hence, they greatly support the Treat All Strategy adopted by the government of Zimbabwe.

**HIV Index Case Testing Strategy**

FHI360 is one of the partners that has developed the innovative HIV Index Case Testing model that has increased its ability to identify HIV positive people in the community and linking them to care. Simply put, it is a model for community HIV testing done by trained nurses who have passed a rapid HIV testing course. A nurse tester identifies clients who test positive to HIV at site entry points such as opportunistic infectious and antenatal clinics and record the names and addresses in the index case register.

According to Tinashe Chimbidzikai, a Senior Program Officer for the Zimbabwe HIV Care and Treatment Project, “75 percent of newly identified people living with HIV were linked to care (pre-ART) with the highest linkage rate achieved in Gokwe South (86%) between October 2015 and September 2016.” In Zimbabwe, it is estimated that 74 percent of people living with HIV know their status. However, as many as 26 percent may never visit a health center until they become ill and in some cases, they will have already infected others. Therefore, expanding HIV testing outside of the facility to these individuals where they live and work is an important step for expanding HIV management initiatives.
Criteria for joining a CARGS:

One should:
- have tested positive to HIV;
- volunteer to join the group of choice;
- be a willing participant in the group;
- have been on HIV treatment for a minimum of 6 months;
- be on line one Antiretroviral treatment;
- 18 years and above;
- have a CD4 of >350 or viral load of less than 1000 copies;
- be stable as confirmed by a health personnel.
The success of the Index Case Testing hinges on the work done by Outreach Workers who serve as a critical bridge between health facilities and the community among other cadres.

Outreach Workers also known as Expert Clients are responsible for identifying index partners and individuals as well as establishing CARGS comprising of a maximum of 12 people living with HIV. Members of the CARGS group take turns to collect medication for other group members and as a result, save time that could be spent collecting medication on a monthly basis. The importance of Outreach Workers in linking people to care is acknowledged by Grace Magombo, a 30 year old mother and CARGS member at Nyazura Clinic who defaulted on her medication for two years.

“I stopped taking medication in 2009 because I felt stigmatized in the community. I got back on medication in 2011 after several follow ups from Emmina Chesai Masango, an Outreach Worker at Nyazura Clinic. I owe my life to her as my health had deteriorated very rapidly,” she lamented. “As you can see, I am now very fit and doing manual work. I dig trenches and collect bins in Nyazura. As a member of the CARGS I don’t get disrupted as we take turns to collect our medications,” she concluded.

“Equally important in the CARGS is the CARGS Leader who is responsible for ensuring the functionality of the group.” As explained by Loveness Mangena, a CARGS Leader is trained to conduct certain specific activities designed to strengthen the group.
Community Adolescent Treatment Support (CATS) Strategy

Africaid is a PEPFAR supported partner scaling up its Zvandiri (‘as I am’) model of differentiated service delivery that combines community-based prevention, treatment, care and support for children, adolescents and young people living with HIV. The model is implemented by CATS who are HIV positive adolescents and young people between the ages of 18-24. This cadre is well trained to mentor peers because they understand each other. As a result, young people living with HIV are able to cope with the unique needs of young people living with HIV. The CATS model is a viable pathway for ensuring that adolescents and young people with HIV do not progress quickly to AIDS. PEPFAR considers this model a “game changer” credited for enhancing testing services, linkage to care, disclosure, treatment access, adherence, and retention in HIV care.

Malvern Musekiwa, aged 20 is a beneficiary of the Zvandiri program as well as a CATS. In July 7, he confidently addressed over 200 young people aged 14-18 from Manicaland province’s top schools during a high schools debate championships held at the American Corner in Mutare. He testified on the importance of knowing one’s HIV status and getting on treatment. He urged the students to take time to understand HIV basics in order to correct misconceptions often associated with the spread of HIV infection. “You cannot get HIV by hugging so don’t shy away from people living with HIV,” he urged fellow young boys and girls. Malvern further shared his experiences of non-adherence to HIV treatment. “I tested HIV positive in 2010. As you can imagine, it was difficult to accept that I was positive at such a young age. At some point, all hope was lost. Eventually, I was initiated on treatment but again, it was difficult to adhere to treatment. I took medication when I felt ill but, discovered that by defaulting, I was digging my own grave as HIV can easily progress to AIDS. This realization came through mentorship from Zvindiri under Africaid,” he concluded.

Several students flocked to the exhibition tents outside the debate hall to find out how they can be tested for HIV as well as access related services. This is testimony of the usefulness of CATS in mobilizing and supporting young people to get tested so they know their HIV status. The work being done by CATS has not only had a positive impact on young people living with HIV, but has also drawn the attention of health development partners and workers in Zimbabwe as noted by Nicola Willis, Executive Director of Africaid.

The success of the differentiated model of care depends a great deal on the collaboration of partners working at both health facilities and communities. Through bi-directional linkages and referrals with clinics, social workers, communities and families are better placed to access services.
Nyemudzai Matiza, a 24 year old married mother of three, counts herself fortunate to be earning a living through pottery. Born in Masasi Village near Chiyadzwa in Marange District, she dropped out of school in 2005 when she was in grade 7. Married with two children, she now resides in Mafararikwa with her young family and is a beneficiary of the DREAMS initiative being implemented by FACT.

In May 2017, Nyemudzai was enrolled for the FACT Community Apprenticeship Program as a Pottery Apprentice to Joyce Sakarombe, a highly experienced potter. The program aims to provide the apprentice with access to opportunities along the work readiness pathway. For six weeks Nyemudzai learned how to make clay pots and other pottery wares. Selling pottery ware is now her new source of livelihood.

"My life has turned around and I am very grateful for this opportunity. I can now make my own clay pots and sell to the local people and middlemen from the urban centers to make a living. I am able to raise money to pay school fees for my son and also participate in internal savings and lending schemes," she sighed.

According to FACT, Mafararikwa falls under households in destitution. Making a living through pottery is clear testimony of how the DREAMS initiative is empowering young women to realize their dreams against all odds.
Sithandekile Chilenje is an 18 year old beneficiary of the DREAMS Initiative under SAfAIDS in Bulawayo. “The DREAMS program has enlightened me as I have acquired different useful skills. I am now in a better position to make decisions that make me remain safe from acquiring HIV,” she explained. She was introduced to the program by Roseli Matimba, a DREAMS facilitator with SAfAIDS.

In addition to undergoing the risk reduction module for adolescents and young women, Sithandekile has acquired livelihood skills. “I weave baskets and make marmalade jam which I sell from home. I am happy because I can now take care of my needs without troubling my parents. Most importantly, I do not have to go out looking for sugar daddies (blessers) who often take advantage of resource poor girls,” she concluded.

According to Roseli, the DREAMS initiative has transformed the lives of many beneficiaries including local communities who have contributed to the empowerment of young girls. She cited how Sithandelile and other girls have learned basket weaving, how to make jam as well as add value to mopani worms (a relish rich in protein) found in Matabeleland South during the rainy season.

“A lot of girls have found something to do as a result of the trainings conducted by DREAMS facilitators. For instance, seven girls have enrolled for hotel and catering and are on attachment at the Greys Inn Hotel,” she narrated.

DREAMS is therefore, proving to be a viable vehicle for delivering a multi-sectoral core package of interventions that go beyond the health sector. Most importantly, the intervention is addressing the structural drivers that directly and indirectly increase girls' HIV risk, including poverty, gender inequality, sexual violence, and lack of education.
PEPFAR provides HIV related services to youth

Over 200 girls and boys between the ages of 14-18 from Manicaland province’s top schools learned about HIV and AIDS on the sidelines of a high schools debate championships held at the American Space in Mutare. Organized by the U.S. Embassy in collaboration with the Debate Association of Zimbabwe and Mutare Teachers College, the debate presented opportunities for young people to discuss issues on health, education, good governance and global warming. This event marked a major step in engaging young people in school to understand the role they need to play towards the achievement of an AIDS-free generation. To support the motion on health, seven PEPFAR supported organizations (OPHID, FACT, FHI263, Africaid, Childline, SAfAIDS and PSI) shared viable strategies for young people to adopt in the wake of HIV and AIDS.

Loveness Mlambo-Chimombe, the Policy Advocacy and Communications Manager for OPHID emphasized the importance of knowing one’s HIV status as it is a “critical gateway” to the prevention and treatment of HIV. “Take time to get tested today so you can be referred for treatment. I encourage you to visit the “Friendship Bench” we have set up so you can interact with a community referral facilitator (CRF),” she concluded.
PSI supported New Start Center offered free counselling and testing services on site. Clara Ropafadzai Barure a student from St Dominic’s is one of the pupils who got tested for HIV at the American Space. “I came here for the debate competition and discovered that I could be tested for HIV. I thank my friend Rejoice Blessing Muruge who encouraged me to know my HIV status. I will definitely encourage others to get tested,” she said. Rejoice is the chairlady of the DREAMS Club at St Dominic’s High School in Mutare.

From left: Clara R. Barure shows the finger pricked when she got tested for HIV to Paidamoyo Chakandonkira, DREAMS President Panashe Manyadza - DREAMS Ambassador, Rejoice Blessing Muruge - DREAMS Chairlady. These are beneficiaries of the DREAMS Club at St Dominic’s High School in Mutare.

Many factors make girls and young women particularly vulnerable to HIV, including gender-based violence, exclusion from economic opportunities, and a lack of access to secondary education. To mitigate against this, the DREAMS initiative is being implemented by local partners with technical support from USAID and CDC Zimbabwe with PEPFAR support. DREAMS stands for: Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS free, Mentored and Safe. SAfAIDS is implementing the DREAMS initiative at St Dominic’s High School among others.