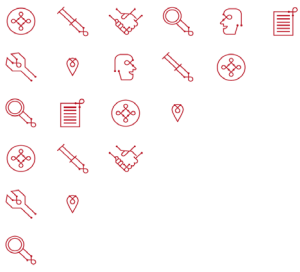




Policy Paper on Strengthening Community HIV Testing in the WHO European Region





Introduction

Community HIV testing services¹ play a crucial role in reaching key populations, including marginalized groups, who face barriers to accessing healthcare services. By bringing testing services directly to communities, it helps reduce stigma, increase awareness, and facilitate early diagnosis and linkage to treatment and care. This proactive approach is essential for achieving the global target of ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic by 2030². Moreover, community HIV testing promotes a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to HIV and STI prevention and treatment, contributing to healthier communities overall.

The early diagnosis and treatment of HIV is crucial for reducing infection rates and improving the health outcomes of individuals and communities. PLHIV on effective ART have their viral load suppressed to an undetectable level, which means that they cannot pass on the virus even if other safer sex methods (e.g. a condom) are not used.³ Community HIV testing has proven effective to detect new HIV cases, especially in communities where access to health care services is limited. *“Based on the WHO’s guidelines on HIV Testing Services, and with the introduction of rapid and self-sampling testing options for HIV, CBVCT services are an essential and indispensable element of the responses to HIV.”*⁴

The critical role of community leadership in the HIV response has been reconfirmed in the *Global AIDS Strategy 2021-2026 - End Inequalities* and the *2021 Political Declaration on Ending AIDS: Ending Inequalities and Getting on Track to End AIDS by 2030*. In the 2021 Political Declaration on Ending AIDS, the United Nations (UN) member states affirmed the key role of communities in advocacy, participation in the coordination of AIDS responses and service delivery. The Political Declaration has identified priority targets to be achieved by member states by 2025 in relation to HIV services, community leadership, integration,⁵ and societal enablers. In the context of **HIV services**, this includes reaching the 95–95–95 testing, treatment and viral suppression targets within all demographics and groups and geographical

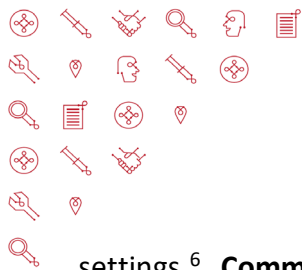
¹ Community HIV testing services although have many forms: CBVCT – community based voluntary counselling and testing, community centre-based testing, outreach testing etc. Their common character is that they take place outside of medical settings.

² Sustainable Development Goal 3 – Target 3.3. End the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases.

³ Prevention Access Campaign. *Resources*. Available at: <https://preventionaccess.org/resources/>

⁴ AAE. *AIDS Action Europe Strategic plan 2022-2026*. 2021, p. 23. Available at: <https://www.aidsactioneurope.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/Work%20ENG%20web%20final.pdf>

⁵ "Invest in robust, resilient, equitable and publicly funded systems for health and social protection that provide 90% of people living with, at risk of or affected by HIV with people-centred and context-specific integrated services for HIV" UNAIDS. *Summary: Let Communities Lead – UNAIDS World AIDS Day report*. 2023, p. 7. Available at: https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/2023WADreport-summary_en.pdf



settings.⁶ **Community leadership** target entails the commitment to increase the proportion of community-led HIV services and to ensure that community-led organisations deliver: 30% of testing and treatment services; 80% of HIV prevention services for people from populations at high risk of infection, and 60% of programmes to support societal changes that enable an effective and sustainable HIV response.⁷ **Societal enablers** are realised through the 10–10–10 targets, which aim at removing punitive laws against PLHIV and other key populations, including GBQMSM and transgender people, people who use drugs, sex workers, and people from other populations often facing punitive legal environments. These targets also aim at reducing and eliminating HIV-related stigma and discrimination, gender inequality, and violence experienced by PLHIV and people from key populations.”⁸

The 2022–2030 WHO Europe strategy on HIV and viral hepatitis (VH) draws attention to the region being off track to meet the **95–95–95** targets, primarily due to the high percentage of late HIV diagnosis and insufficient access to antiretroviral treatment.⁹ As highlighted in the WHO Europe Regional action plan, the full range of existing evidence, tools and strategies to address HIV, VH, and STIs do not seem to be utilised by all countries.¹⁰ The availability of community HIV testing services and the level of support provided to them is one of such examples.

The COBATEST Network, in collaboration with AIDS Action Europe, is dedicated to strengthening community HIV testing services across Europe and Central Asia. By providing training, capacity building, and advocacy support to civil society organizations (CSOs), the network aims to enhance the stability and sustainability of community HIV testing services. Despite challenges such as limited funding and regulatory barriers, COBATEST Network member partner organisations play a crucial role in expanding testing coverage and improving linkage to care, especially during times of crisis. For instance, community services proved essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring access to testing, care, and support even amidst lockdowns and difficulties in accessing healthcare centres.

Main challenges faced by the community HIV testing services

Despite their valuable contributions, CSOs providing community HIV testing services encounter several challenges in their efforts to expand community HIV testing:

Inconsistent Legal Frameworks: Legal and policy barriers differ significantly among countries. Some nations restrict testing to medical professionals, limiting the role of trained lay providers. Outdated

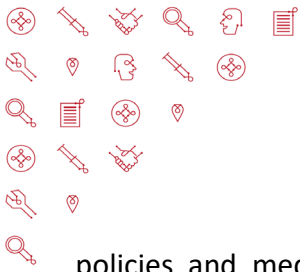
⁶ United Nations General Assembly. *Political declaration on HIV and AIDS: Ending inequalities and getting on track to end AIDS by 2030*. 2021, p. 14. Available at: https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2021/2021_political-declaration-on-hiv-and-aids

⁷ *ibid.* p. 18.

⁸ UNAIDS. *Let Communities Lead – UNAIDS World AIDS Day report*. 2023, p. 8; p. 93. Available at: https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/2023WADreport_en.pdf

⁹ WHO. *Regional action plans for ending AIDS and the epidemics of viral hepatitis and sexually transmitted infections 2022–2030*. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/369243/9789289058957-eng.pdf?sequence=7>

¹⁰ *ibid.*



policies and medicalization of services impede the expansion of community HIV testing initiatives. Harmonizing legal frameworks is essential to enable community HIV testing services by a broader range of providers.

Non-Inclusion in National HIV Plans: National HIV response guidelines often lack sections on community HIV testing protocols, leading to inconsistent implementation. All national guidelines should align with a differentiated approach to HIV testing, including community HIV testing.

Sustainability and Funding: Many community HIV testing programs struggle to secure sustainable funding. Grant application procedures, often annual or biannual, can hinder program stability. Streamlining funding processes is vital for program continuity.

Underutilization of Data: Inadequate data collection and reporting impede the monitoring and evaluation of community HIV testing programs. Improved data inclusion in national surveillance systems is essential for assessing program effectiveness.

Provider Training: The shortage of healthcare professionals, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the importance of training lay providers to conduct rapid HIV testing. Advocacy efforts should emphasize this need.

Recommendations

To address these challenges and maximize the impact of community HIV testing efforts, the following recommendations are proposed:

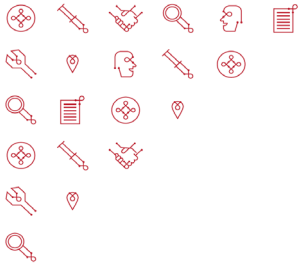
Legal and Policy Alignment: Encourage countries to harmonize their legal frameworks with international guidelines, allowing trained lay providers to conduct community HIV testing services. Ensure that national HIV response guidelines incorporate community HIV testing protocols in line with the WHO and ECDC recommended differentiated approach to HIV testing.

Funding Streamlining: Advocate for simplified funding processes to enhance program sustainability. This includes exploring multi-year funding models and reducing administrative burdens on community-based organizations.

Data Inclusion: Promote the inclusion of community HIV testing data in national surveillance systems. Develop clear mechanisms for data compilation from all testing facilities/entities.

Provider Training: Advocate for national training programs that empower lay providers to conduct rapid HIV testing safely and efficiently. Highlight the benefits of task-sharing in relieving healthcare sector strain.

Awareness and Advocacy: Support community-based organizations in their advocacy efforts to raise awareness of the importance of community HIV testing services. Promote adherence to existing national HIV plans and guidelines.



Conclusion

Community HIV testing services are invaluable in ensuring equitable access to HIV testing and care. To harness their full potential, policy and practice improvements are crucial. By aligning legal frameworks, streamlining funding, enhancing data inclusion, promoting lay provider training, and fostering awareness and advocacy, we can strengthen community HIV testing efforts and accelerate progress towards ending the HIV epidemics in Europe and Central Asia.