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SUCCESS STORY

Key Populations Count: Improving HIV Data Collection in Honduras



In what might seem at first glance a mere bureaucratic detail, unworthy of headlines or fanfare, the Honduran Ministry of Health (MOH) announced the national launch of four new data collection forms on September 22, 2016. What those forms represent, however, is a crucial step toward ensuring access to lifesaving HIV prevention and treatment services for tens of thousands of Hondurans.

The results of a collaboration between the MOH, the USAID- and PEPFAR-funded LINKAGES project, and USAID/Honduras, the four simple forms — one for HIV counseling and testing, one for HIV care and treatment, one for patient follow-up, and another for community-based HIV prevention — replace more than 100 forms that had been in use throughout the country, enabling the ministry to streamline and standardize data collection, analysis, and reporting.

The forms also capture for the first time separate data on each of the key populations (KPs) the MOH's HIV program seeks to reach — a breakthrough that officials, advocates, and health care providers have hailed as a major accomplishment.

“We cover all the indicators the country needs to have an appropriate response to the HIV epidemic,” says Dr. Billy Gonzalez, head of the MOH's Information Management Unit (Unidad de Gestión de la Información, or UGI).

Speakers at a September 22 launch event in Tegucigalpa also celebrated the introduction of a digital platform created by LINKAGES and UGI to support the MOH's health management information system (HMIS). The first of its kind in the Central American region, this online platform allows health workers to fill out electronic versions of the new forms, using a mobile device or computer to enter HIV service data directly into the national HMIS.

Many forms, no KP data

The LINKAGES project seeks to improve access to and sustained use of the continuum of HIV prevention, care, and treatment services among KPs affected by the virus. Tracking clients' progression through that continuum and identifying gaps in services is essential to ensuring that people receive the services they need.

In most countries, however, the national HMIS does not collect information by KP type. An assessment conducted in February 2016 revealed that Honduras was no exception.



In a program designed to change risk behaviors among MSM, a mentor discusses HIV with peers in an Honduran park.

Photo Credit: Management Sciences for Health

A LINKAGES team, led by Senior Monitoring and Evaluation Officer Andrew Igbo, conducted the assessment in collaboration with UGI. Team members visited 10 health facilities in the countries' two largest cities from February 16 to 25, examining methods, tools, and protocols for data collection and the systems and processes used for data input, storage, and output.



Photo credit: Persy Buck

“We thank USAID and LINKAGES for their support, as well as the ministry’s Management Information Unit (UGI) for the huge effort. It is incredible how much has been done in such little time.”

— Dr. Edna Yolani Batres, Minister of Health

They found that staff at the facilities were using multiple forms and formats to capture data on HIV services. At some health facilities, more than 20 forms were in use.

At many facilities, data were also recorded in less structured ways. “We found information in journals, notepads, emails, and on scraps of paper,” Igbo says. “The assessment concluded that the widespread practice of using unstructured documents is an indication that internal processes are not being followed, which makes them susceptible to compliance risks, errors, and omissions.”

The content of the forms was also problematic, Gonzalez notes. “We found a large diversity of data collection instruments that were not only unofficial, but also collected confusing and irrelevant information.”

The assessment report included recommendations for consolidating forms, capturing data, and standardizing processes. A key recommendation was to collect and record data on the following key populations: sex workers, men who have sex with men, and transgender people.

A workshop organized by LINKAGES Honduras brought together representatives from health facilities, the MOH, and other stakeholders in April 2016 to explore how to simplify the HIV data forms and improve the HMIS. The workshop participants agreed that LINKAGES would develop an initial draft of four consolidated forms, which would be reviewed by key stakeholders, refined, and pilot tested. They also agreed on the need for an online platform that would enable health officials to monitor HIV prevention and care services through centralized, timely, and secure access to data from health facilities and implementing partners.

Toward national implementation

In June 2016, LINKAGES Honduras conducted an online survey to gather feedback on the first draft of the consolidated forms from 55 key stakeholders, including Honduran officials and HIV-services personnel and representatives of international partners, civil society organizations, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Global Fund. That feedback guided the development of a second draft of the forms.

The second draft was pilot tested for two weeks with 45 participants in the cities of Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and La Ceiba. Among those participants were HIV counselors, lab technicians, and nurses from 11 MOH health facilities and six civil society organizations that offer HIV testing to key populations.

“The creation of the platform is a first for the Central America region.”

— *Marianela Corriols, MPH, PhD, USAID HIV Strategic Information Advisor for Central America*



Photo credit: Pery Buck

Before the pilot test began on August 1, LINKAGES staff trained the participants to use the new forms in paper and digital versions. LINKAGES also provided the trainees with data plans and technical support so they could input the forms from their personal mobile devices, because many of the public health facilities lack Internet service and even computers.

Participants submitted 436 forms during the pilot program. They also took part in focus group discussions about their experiences with both the print and digital versions of the new forms.

That feedback was presented to the MOH along with recommendations for final adjustments to the consolidated forms. It also provided the MOH with valuable information about the challenges and opportunities involved in using the forms in digital format only and the training and resources required for effective implementation of the new system.



Photo credit: Pery Buck

“We are taking HIV as the point of departure, to replicate the model in other health systems.”

— *Dr. Billy Gonzalez, Head of the Ministry of Health's Information Management Unit (UGI)*

Gonzalez says that his unit's collaboration with LINKAGES will also make an important contribution to UGI's broader effort to develop an integrated HMIS. “We are taking HIV as the point of departure,” he explains, “to replicate the model in other health systems.”

The Honduran Minister of Health emphasized that point in a speech at the launch event, noting that the country's president has mandated that her ministry improve its information system. “We have always wanted a tool that would centralize this information,” Dr. Edna Yolani Batres said. “HIV might be a small window, but this opens up a huge opportunity.”