

SUCCESS STORY

LINKAGES Malawi and Government of Malawi Partner to Expand Services for Key Populations

LINKAGES Malawi initiated its programming in February 2015 in four districts — Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu, and Mangochi — and expanded activities to Zomba and Machinga districts with the start of the PEPFAR DREAMS Initiative in 2016. To improve services related to HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) for key populations, focusing particularly on female sex workers (FSWs) and men who have sex with men (MSM), the LINKAGES Malawi team sought to improve the enrollment and retention in care and treatment of people who test positive for HIV and reduce loss to follow-up of people who drop out of the HIV services cascade, among other goals.

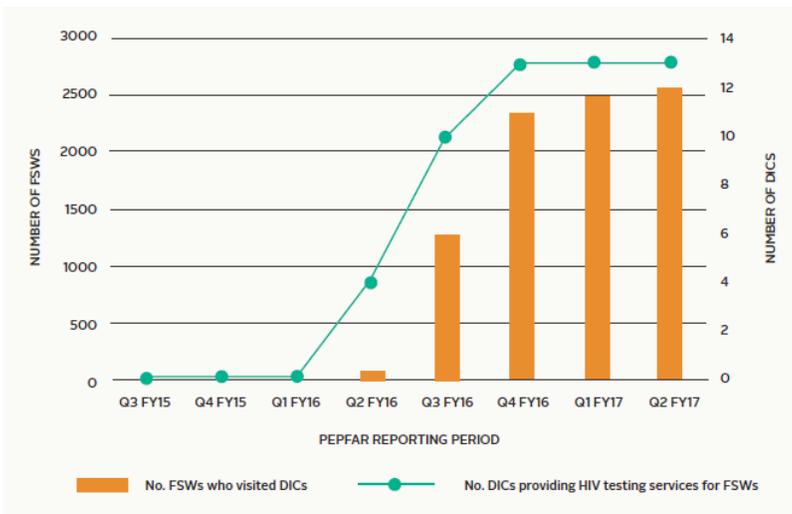


Figure 1. Expansion of testing services at drop-in centers and number of FSWs who visited drop-in centers per quarter

Setting Up Drop-in Centers

Since the inception of the project in Malawi, one of the most notable LINKAGES Malawi accomplishments has been the establishment of drop-in centers catering to FSWs. This is important because criminalization of sex work and the culture of stigma and discrimination discourage FSWs from openly identifying themselves as such when seeking health services. In addition, real or perceived stigmatization by providers makes FSWs reluctant to disclose their sexual risk behaviors. Both make it difficult to reach them with services. In particular, the need to improve enrollment and retention in antiretroviral therapy (ART) calls for expanding ART service points that appeal to FSWs.

To date, LINKAGES has set up 13 drop-in centers for FSWs in Lilongwe, Blantyre, Mzuzu, Machinga, Mangochi, and Zomba. The drop-in centers are increasingly meeting the needs of FSWs, evidenced by the increase in the number of FSWs seeking services (Figure 1).

LINKAGES has expanded the range of services at the drop-in centers over time (Figure 2). Initially, the services offered at the drop-in centers consisted of HIV counseling and testing, STI screening and management, post-exposure prophylaxis, referrals to ART, and other health services. Family planning and gender-based violence screening and response have also been added to the list as staff capacities have been built. In addition, LINKAGES has begun integrating ART provision at the drop-in centers.

Adding ART through Partnership with the Malawi Government

Adding ART to the repertoire of services offered at drop-in centers was a critical goal, but there was a roadblock: drop-in centers are not considered part of the national health infrastructure in Malawi, and they needed to be in order to provide ART. To surmount this difficulty, LINKAGES Malawi staff drew on their positive rapport with the District Health Offices, who in March

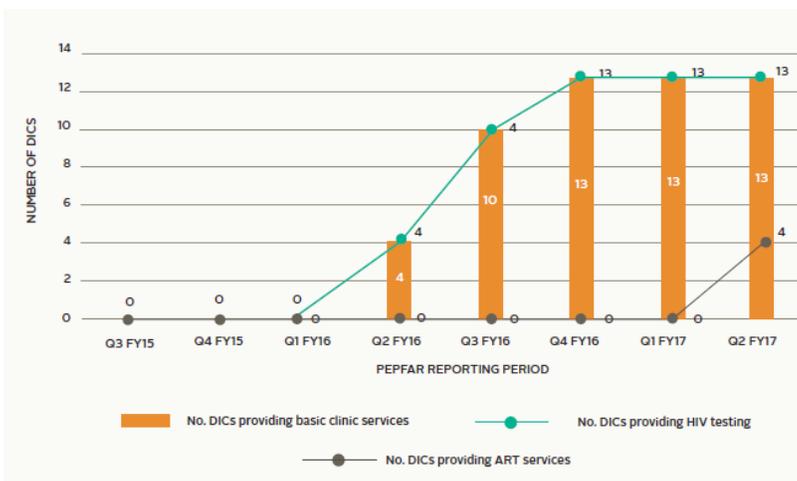


Figure 2. Expansion of services offered at drop-in centers for FSWs per quarter

2016 agreed to have five of the drop-in centers categorized as subunits of the local government-run health facilities. This is already increasing the number of FSWs visiting the drop-in centers (Figure 3), improving enrollment in care and treatment among people found to be living with HIV, and reducing loss to follow-up. The team hopes to make ART available in other drop-in centers, including in the three they have recently opened for MSM.

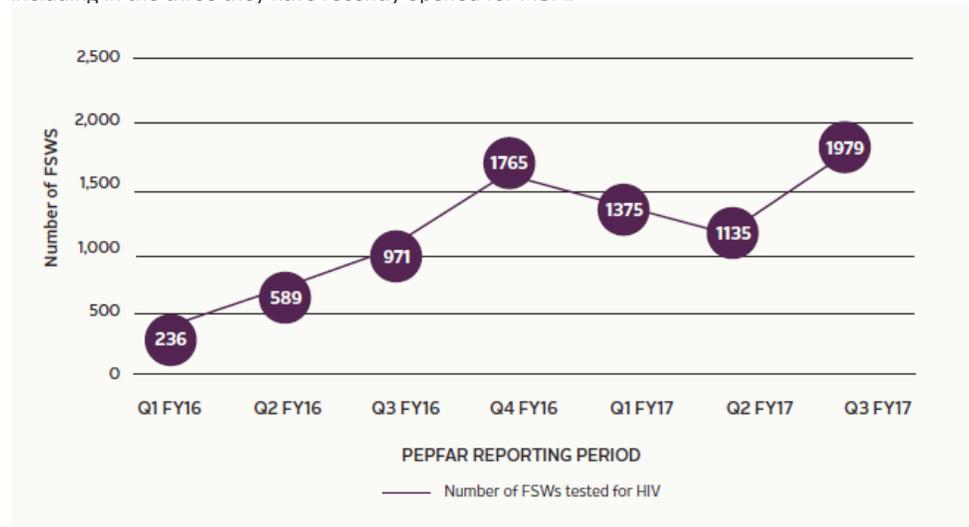


Figure 3. Number of unique FSWs tested for HIV at drop-in centers in Malawi

Expanding the range of clinical services offered at drop-in centers beyond HIV testing has broadened the appeal of drop-in centers for key population members.

Supply Chain Management Also Benefits from Government Partnership

Expanding the range of clinical services offered at drop-in centers beyond HIV testing has broadened the appeal of drop-in centers for key population members. Peer educators encourage them to attend the drop-in centers to receive resources and support for their health and well-being, including for STI treatment. This has become even more appealing to key populations thanks to the reliable stock of STI treatment drugs offered at the drop-in centers — a success achieved through LINKAGES' negotiation with the Ministry of Health to establish a separate supply chain for free STI drugs. This ensures that key population members can consistently receive STI treatment, which is sometimes unavailable at public health facilities due to stock outs.