The first clinic in Asia to offer health services exclusively for transgender people opened its doors in Bangkok on 27 November 2015. Since then, the Tangerine Community Health Center has provided health care and counseling to more than 800 transgender clients.

“The response from the transgender community has been very positive,” says Krittima Samitpol, Tangerine clinic supervisor. “Many clients have experienced discrimination when they sought care at other facilities, so they appreciate that the Tangerine staff are friendly and knowledgeable about trans health issues.”

Operated by the Thai Red Cross AIDS Research Center, the clinic provides much-needed trans-friendly services, including health screening and HIV prevention and care, in a bright, well-appointed clinic located in the same building as a busy HIV testing center, the Thai Red Cross Anonymous Clinic.

The impetus for the Tangerine clinic was the high risk of HIV infection among transgender women in Thailand. (Globally, transgender women are almost 50 times more likely to have HIV compared to other adults). However, the Thai Red Cross AIDS Research Center and its partners recognized from the start that transgender individuals have other, sometimes more pressing, health concerns.

Many Tangerine clients report that they have faced judgmental attitudes and harassment at hospitals and clinics. Even a seemingly routine visit to a gynecologist can be a humiliating experience for a trans man as he sits in a waiting room among dozens of women. Not surprisingly, many avoid or delay seeking care.

Hormone replacement drugs, used for gender reassignment, are easy to buy in Thai pharmacies and on the black market. A study conducted in Thailand by the Thai Transgender Alliance and Transgender Europe found that almost half of transgender people who had used these drugs had never consulted a doctor about their transition.

USAID supports HIV services at the Tangerine clinic through the LINKAGES project. Other donors provide funding for hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and related care. By providing HRT, Tangerine staff members hope to reduce the widespread misuse of hormones, which can lead to serious liver, kidney, and cardiovascular problems. They also offer follow-up care for sex reassignment surgery (SRS). Such care, which is difficult to find in Thailand and other parts of Asia, includes psychosocial counseling, HRT, hormone-balance testing, blood tests, and Pap smears.

Expertise in trans health care is only part of the clinic's appeal. “Tangerine offers services for and by trans people, in an atmosphere that is comfortable and welcoming,” says Assani Shanjam, a counselor at the clinic.

Most of the staff at the clinic are transgender, and all staff members receive annual training in gender-sensitivity to ensure that they can provide trans-friendly services. Before Tangerine opened, the Thai Red Cross Society held a consultation with members of the transgender community, discussing their health care needs and the design of the clinic’s services.
“For many clients, this is also an entry point into HIV prevention and care.”

Entry point

All clients of the Tangerine Health Care Center are offered counseling and testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. “The customized services encourage more trans clients to seek health services that are not available at public hospitals,” explains LINKAGES Program Officer Amornrat Arunmanakul. “For many clients, this is also an entry point into HIV prevention and care.”

A total of 842 clients have received HIV testing and counseling (HTC) services since the clinic opened. Nine percent of HTC clients in FY 2016 and 4 percent of HCT clients in FY 2017 tested positive for HIV.

Initial consultations and two HIV tests per year are offered free of charge. LINKAGES’ support for the cost of operating the clinic enables the Tangerine clinic to offer other services at low cost; clients pay 400 baht (US$11.50) for most visits. Tangerine staff members support each client at every step of the cascade of HIV services, helping them navigate the options for prevention or care and providing support for adherence to prevention or treatment regimens.

If those who test HIV-negative express interest in starting pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), they can receive PrEP at the clinic at a cost of 30 baht (US$1) per day or they can be referred to community-based partners of the LINKAGES Thailand project to receive free PrEP under the Princess Soamsavali PrEP scheme.

Those who test positive for HIV may begin antiretroviral therapy (ART) at Tangerine within a week of learning their serostatus. If they cannot afford to pay the subsidized cost of ART at the clinic, they are referred to the Poz Home Center, another LINKAGES partner, where they receive assistance in obtaining free ART services at designated hospitals. By September 2017, 35 clients were receiving HIV treatment and care at Tangerine, and another 27 had been referred for care.

LINKAGES is working with the Thai Red Cross and the Tangerine clinic to attract more clients. “We aim to expand the clinic’s reach beyond the initial group of trans women who came for these services,” explains Stephen Mills, LINKAGES regional director for the Asia Pacific Region.

A Model Program

Most clients learn about the Tangerine Health Care Center through word of mouth or its Facebook page, which features frequent posts of photos, videos, and news.

The clinic established a connection with Chulalongkorn Hospital to facilitate referrals to the hospital for SRS, as well as referrals from the hospital to Tangerine for post-SRS care and other services. Tangerine also works with the Gen V clinic at Ramathibodhi Hospital, which offers specialized services for transgender youth.

As the first transgender health clinic in the region, Tangerine serves as a learning site for organizations in Thailand and other countries. Visitors have included representatives from transgender groups in Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, and Pakistan.

Another visitor, UNAIDS Deputy Director Luiz Loures, noted that Tangerine’s work is an integral part of the global effort to remove HIV as a global public health threat. “To end AIDS, the health and rights of key populations need to be at the center,” he says. “The Tangerine Community Health Center is transforming the health choices for transgender people.”

Jiratchaya Mongkolnavin, clinic advocate and winner of international transgender pageants, and Krittima Samitpol, Tangerine clinic supervisor, stand next to a sign that explains the integrated services offered at the clinic.

Photo Credit: Tom Varavut Thanuthamanont/ Prism LGBTI magazine

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