

SUCCESS STORY

LINKAGES, the Ministry of Health and Wellness,
and EQUALS Partner to Develop Drop-in Center
in Barbados

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transgender (trans) people, and female sex workers (FSWs). Registered as a nongovernmental organization in 2013, EQUALS promotes human rights, sexual and reproductive health, strengthened community engagement and capacity, and stigma-free services among these key populations.

Supported by staff from the USAID- and PEPFAR-funded Linkages across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES) project, EQUALS has also garnered the support of the Barbados Ministry of Health and Wellness (MHW). As the National HIV/AIDS Commission's National Strategic Plan for HIV 2014–2018 states, “The role of civil society organizations in ensuring the success of the national strategic plan for HIV (NSP) cannot be overestimated. It is critical that approaches in the plan seek to increase and enhance their engagement in the national response and to ensure they complement Government's efforts.” In the case of EQUALS, once the MHW approved the DIC as a testing site in June 2017, EQUALS began hosting testing events for MSM, trans people, and FSWs, with MHW counselors providing the counseling and testing services. More recently, in September 2018, two EQUALS outreach workers became certified to deliver HIV rapid testing services without supervision as part of the MHW's national efforts to expand community-based HIV testing services. This will provide opportunities for community members to be tested outside of regular MHW hours at the DIC and to reach “hidden” key populations who may not be accessing services for fear of stigma, discrimination, and being identified.

As Michael Rapley, EQUALS project lead, describes, “The drop-in center was opened to see if creating an LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender]-specific space would increase access to services. And it did. In the first month alone, seven people were tested on site at the DIC, and over the first year more than 120 MSM and trans clients were tested. In addition, other services, such as psychosocial counseling, which is a very popular service, legal aid, and emergency housing were offered and utilized.” He adds, “Beyond these services, the drop-in center provides a space for the community to get away from the pressures of life and have a place where they can be themselves. I have witnessed significant improvements in the attitudes of those who regularly utilize the drop-in center, with boosts in confidence and improvements in communications skills.”

And the services offered do not stop there. In May 2018, EQUALS introduced screening for syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia — offered as a package with HIV testing — leading to an increase in the number of people accessing HIV counseling and testing services at the DIC and an increase in case finding. In addition, since the MHW began offering pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV prevention at a clinic in March 2018, EQUALS has successfully linked nine MSM for enrollment in these services.



When the DIC opened in 2017, Sam,* a 20-year-old gay male client, was tested for HIV. He says, "EQUALS has had a positive impact on my life. They provided me with an opportunity for testing, and when my result was positive, I found that the environment they create [...] significantly helped me to accept the result, seek treatment, and adhere to my medication, to the point where I have recently been discovered to have undetectable levels of virus. They create an empowering environment, and I enjoy being involved in their activities and events. I am currently helping to host the youth groups once a month, along with other people my age, to help promote safe sexual practices."

Throughout 2018, LINKAGES Barbados has continued to work closely with the MHW and implementing partners such as EQUALS to advance the country's strategic objective of strengthening HIV services for key populations. By ensuring that partner community-based organizations have the capacity and systems to continue to provide quality services, LINKAGES is helping to ensure the sustainability of the effort beyond the LINKAGES project.

Raven Gill, a trans outreach worker for EQUALS, describes the positive impact LINKAGES has had on the organization. "With the support of LINKAGES, I have become certified as an HIV rapid tester and in counseling, which aids me in my current capacity as the lead peer outreach worker providing information and services with the utmost confidentiality. This enables me to do HIV rapid testing for transgender people, down-low and bisexual men, and men who do not identify as MSM who do not wish to disclose their sexual acts or preferences with traditional health care providers in public health clinics." She continues, "LINKAGES has provided tremendous opportunities for civil society organizations like EQUALS to be in the room with key stakeholders and policymakers [...]. Without LINKAGES' support it would be 10 times harder to achieve what we have done. Going forward, I hope the seeds LINKAGES has helped to plant will fully blossom and mature into sustainable tools that we can use as we continue to work in the community."

Dr. Anton Best, senior medical officer of health of the HIV/STI Programme, MHW, praises the role EQUALS has played in efforts to bring HIV services to key populations: "The National HIV/STI Programme in Barbados has been in a continuous process of expanding access to high-quality prevention and treatment HIV and STI services. The advent of EQUALS represents an opportunity for strategic partnership for the MHW, allowing us to gain trust with and to reach marginalized populations in Barbados to offer these much-needed services. Through this partnership and the provision of services, we are more effective at reducing the incidence of HIV and STIs through the country and thus improving the lives and well-being of all people in Barbados."

* Pseudonym