



SUCCESS STORY

Going the Extra Mile – The Role of Peer HIV Counselors

HIV Services and System Strengthening project



BACKGROUND

"I feel a huge commitment to that population (FC), reaching the project targets is important, but the most important thing for me is to support people who feel lost or afraid. Commitment really makes a difference, and I am totally committed to my work."

Rutt Rodríguez is a peer HIV counselor at the comprehensive HIV care service (SAI) that operates at the Yolanda Guzmán Clinic, an implementing partner of the Santo Domingo service network, supported by the HIV Services and System Strengthening project of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), in the Dominican Republic funded by PEPFAR.

Rutt's work goes beyond a simple job description. Her 17 years of hard work with people living with HIV are driven by an immense desire to change lives, and to offer beneficiaries the opportunity to live a healthy life.

Based on her experience as a woman living with HIV, Rutt encourages clients to get tested so that, if they are positive, they can start antiretroviral treatment as quickly as possible. She conducts HIV testing, index testing, and home visits.

Additionally, Rutt carries out community activities aimed at strengthening access to HIV services, for the non-governmental organization Dominican Family Planning Association (ADOPLAFAM).

INTERVENTION

Within the context of the HIV Services and System Strengthening project, Rutt implements an approach called "Active Search" to increase ART initiation, prevent loss to follow up, and implement index testing the SAI Yolanda Guzman Clinic, which includes:

- Search for records and identification of patients who have high rates of unsuppressed viral load, i.e. greater than 1000 copies;
- Make phone calls to vulnerable patients;
- Conduct home visits to the families of patients who tested positive to HIV, and implement index testing;
- Transport beneficiaries of the index tests to the SAI for their lab tests;
- In direct coordination with partner ADOPLAFAM, work with a lab specialist assigned to the HIV service of the Yolanda Guzman clinic for the delivery of results and the initiation of same-day antiretroviral therapy to patients diagnosed with HIV.

Referring to her day-to-day work as a peer counsellor, which she combines with that of community promoter, Rutt explains the process once she identifies a person who has tested positive:

"If I cannot contact the patients (by phone), I take my vehicle and go to their homes to find them and bring them personally to the SAI so they can enter treatment that same day. Many of those who come here are willing to participate in index testing, so I contact their references and if they accept I go to their homes and perform a rapid test and if they test positive I immediately bring them to the SAI. I implement active searching. I often tell my colleagues, today I will be a little late because I am going to be in the streets to look for my patients".

OUTCOMES

Thanks to Rutt Rodriguez's commitment as a provider of clinical and community services and going the extra mile, Yolanda Guzman Clinic has improved the diagnosis of HIV cases, and the linkage of these patients in antiretroviral therapy.

Rutt was key in the implementation of the Q4 "surge plan" in Yolanda Guzman, with the support of ADOPLAFAM, which resulted in 281 index tests, with 15% positive diagnoses. During this period, this health center linked 69 at risk clients to antiretroviral therapy, representing an increase of 213% compared to Q3 FY20 (only 22).

"We must have love and commitment for what we do, we work with human beings, and if everyone contributes a grain of sand, we can achieve great changes." -Rutt Rodriguez

*Rutt Rodriguez, Peer HIV Counsellor at the Yolanda Guzman clinic.
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