

# When supply meets demand: PrEP scale-up in the Philippines

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***“The community is the architect of PrEP programming in the Philippines. And we know what the community wants—because we are the community.”***

*—John Danvic Rosadiño,  
Program and Innovations  
Director, LoveYourself*



The Philippines is experiencing the fastest-growing HIV epidemic in the Western Pacific, with a 411% increase in HIV incidence over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> Key populations (KPs), including men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender (trans) women, among others, are disproportionately affected, accounting for at least 92% of newly diagnosed cases in 2022.<sup>2</sup> New biomedical HIV prevention technologies such as oral and injectable pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) hold great promise for decreasing transmission. When taken as prescribed, oral PrEP reduces the risk of HIV infection through sexual exposure by about 99%,<sup>2</sup> and injectable PrEP may be even more effective than oral PrEP due to higher rates of correct use.<sup>3</sup>

KP organizations are leading the way in scaling PrEP in the Philippines. By the end of 2022, more than 12,000 people had initiated oral PrEP for HIV prevention, of whom more than 60% were initiated by community-based organizations (CBOs).<sup>4</sup> One CBO—LoveYourself—started more than 30% of these individuals on PrEP. Established in 2011 by gay and bisexual men and youth, LoveYourself seeks to improve sexual health and create safe spaces for community members to access HIV testing, condoms, and lubricant. The organization currently operates eight community centers in Metro Manila and has expanded to Bacolod, Baguio, Cavite, Cebu, and Davao.

With funding from the Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project led by FHI 360 and supported by USAID and PEPFAR, LoveYourself has implemented a de-medicalized, community-based, peer-driven approach to PrEP services. Through the use of this approach, paired with EpiC's supply chain management and real-time forecasting of PrEP demand, both LoveYourself and the Philippines overall are seeing notable success in PrEP scale-up.

## Local evidence to inform policy and guidelines

In 2016, Thailand was the only country in Asia where oral PrEP was available. Noting the positive outcomes of oral PrEP in Thailand and other parts of the world, communities in the Philippines, too, wanted to have this option made available to them. With support from the Department of Health (DOH)'s Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM), LoveYourself partnered with the World Health Organization (WHO), amfAR, and The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria to implement PrEP Pilipinas (PrEPPI), a demonstration project evaluating the feasibility and acceptability of community-based PrEP services for MSM and trans women. The study initiated in 2017 and received an overwhelming response from the community, with more than 3,000 people expressing interest in participating. During the two-year study period, no new HIV infections occurred among the 250 MSM and trans women who were enrolled, no increases were seen in sexually transmitted infection incidence or number of sexual

partners, and there was no change in condom use with casual partners.<sup>5</sup> PrEP<sup>PPY</sup> showed that a community-based approach to PrEP delivery was not only feasible and acceptable, but also effective.

In 2019, the study team presented findings to the DOH and supported the drafting of a policy that would include PrEP in the Health Sector HIV Strategic Plan (2020–2022). In January 2021, the DOH released PrEP management guidelines, which included the delivery of PrEP by CBOs based on the success of community-based delivery in PrEP<sup>PPY</sup><sup>6</sup> and specified PrEP as a prevention strategy to be implemented through the national HIV program. Following EpiC's launch in the country in 2021, EpiC participated in the national technical working group that supported the DOH to update the guidelines to ensure alignment with current global recommendations, particularly in terms of differentiated service delivery of PrEP and de-medicalization of PrEP.

## Community-driven differentiated service delivery

The DOH placed CBOs at the center of PrEP scale-up through their Healthy Pilipinas campaign in collaboration with EpiC's Free to Be U campaign.<sup>7</sup> Healthy Pilipinas was the previous initiative of the DOH that aimed to encourage healthy lifestyles, prevent diseases, and improve the overall community health of Filipinos. Free to Be U seeks to empower people living with and at risk of HIV to break free from fear, labels, and shame and to live, love, and pursue their goals as they choose. The campaign raises awareness of available HIV programs and services, including PrEP, for at-risk populations. In addition, it works with organizations and individuals from the community to make their voices and stories heard to promote HIV prevention, testing, and treatment, as well as to destigmatize HIV and people living with HIV.<sup>8</sup>

### *Free to Be U and Healthy Pilipinas Campaign Collaboration<sup>9</sup>*



LoveYourself's online demand-creation campaigns have been foundational to raising awareness of PrEP among target audiences. The campaigns use unique messaging, images, and channels to reach different subpopulations of MSM and trans women. For example, Men of PrEP is a Facebook campaign designed to appeal to gay, bisexual, and other MSM. With the introduction of this campaign, demand for PrEP surged, and PrEP enrollment increased from 50 people at the start of the campaign to 750 after three months.

From the beginning, LoveYourself made PrEP available in a variety of settings as part of a de-medicalized approach to PrEP services. Currently, the organization is offering HIV testing and PrEP services in schools, workplaces, and other establishments

frequented by KPs through the LoveYourself Caravan—a mobile HIV service delivery outreach program. During the COVID-19 pandemic, EpiC and LoveYourself provided PrEP through telemedicine appointments, including a consultation with a physician and a coaching session with a peer facilitator, and in partnership with a diagnostics facility with 50 branches nationwide.<sup>10</sup> With the introduction of HIV self-testing (HIVST) in the Philippines in 2022, LoveYourself began offering fully virtual PrEP service delivery, or TelePrEP. Through telemedicine, trained providers assess people with HIV-negative test results for PrEP. A courier delivers PrEP to the person's home or other location, and future prescriptions are dispensed after follow-up HIVST.<sup>11</sup> One of the first fully virtual PrEP services in the Philippines, TelePrEP shows potential as a differentiated service delivery model for reaching hard-to-reach populations with PrEP and other health services.

Another cornerstone of the LoveYourself approach is individualized support for PrEP users by their peers. PrEPPEY peers are volunteers of all ages who coach PrEP users on strategies for using PrEP. They are trained to engage in conversations about PrEP through client-centered strategies.

## Matching PrEP supply and demand

EpiC has provided technical assistance to effectively manage the supply chain and distribution of PrEP to the sites where clients will access it, both of which are critical in the context of robust demand for PrEP. Oral PrEP implementation outside of research studies in the Philippines began in March 2021 with drugs donated by the Global Fund, and PEPFAR-donated PrEP soon followed in May 2021. EpiC helped identify initial implementation sites and built the capacity of health care providers to provide clinical management of PrEP clients and of community outreach workers to create demand for PrEP. In 2022, EpiC and WHO successfully advocated for the inclusion of PrEP into the national drug formulary, allowing the use of government funds to purchase PrEP. In 2024, the country's PrEP supply began to include government purchase of PrEP, in addition to the Global Fund donations.

To facilitate strategic PrEP implementation, in late 2023, EpiC supported the DOH to set national-level targets for the number of people the DOH planned to initiate and retain on PrEP. Site-level targets were then set and disseminated to sites based on KP size estimates, testing coverage, and current PrEP coverage. This ensures both the contribution of each site to national achievement of PrEP coverage and the provision of PrEP services to the immediate communities served by EpiC partners. The site-level targets also serve as the basis for the allocation of PrEP and HIV testing commodities, as well as for the conduct of online and on-site activities to promote PrEP.

*LoveYourself's Men of PrEP Facebook online demand creation*

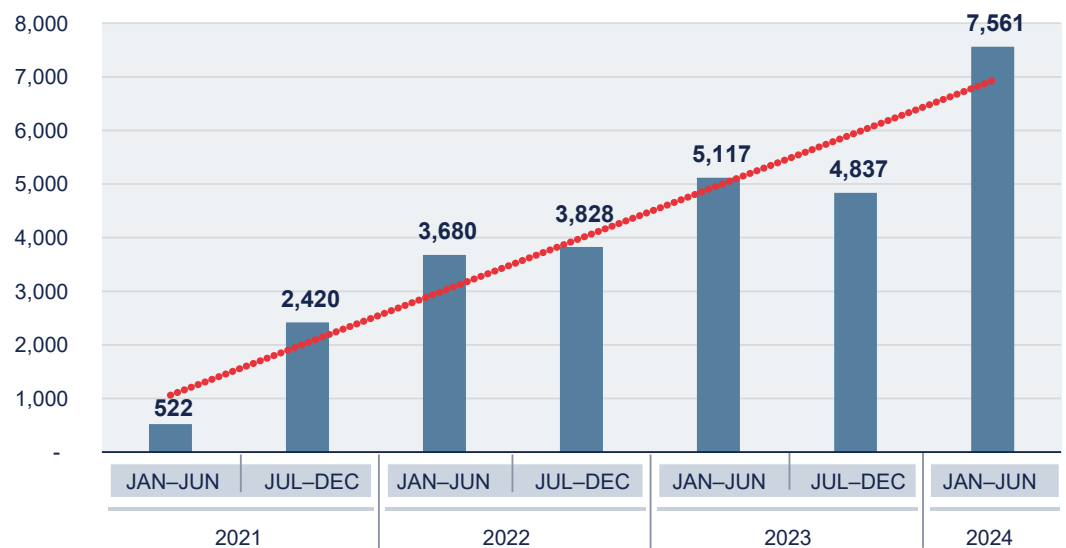


In addition, EpiC uses the site targets set with the DOH and sites to provide technical assistance for PrEP supply chain management. Based on the targets, EpiC conducts monthly analyses to forecast the amount of PrEP needed at each facility. The allocation analysis considers the number of people using PrEP at that facility and the number of people who initiated PrEP in the previous month/quarter to predict how much PrEP will be needed for the coming month. EpiC then matches the supply of commodities needed accordingly. During implementation, EpiC regularly checks with the sites to confirm the PrEP stocks on hand to prevent stock-outs and ensure continuous PrEP service delivery. As part of this effort, EpiC takes part in the monitoring of PrEP delivery to the project-supported DOH Centers for Health Development and assists the DOH in re-allocating commodities between facilities within the region to prevent stock-outs. EpiC continues PrEP capacity building for supply-chain management through regional trainings, site-level orientations, and technical support activities for both EpiC implementing partners and other clinics offering PrEP in the Greater Metro Manila Area.

### Increases in PrEP coverage and enrollment

With the tailored support provided by the EpiC project, the national PrEP program in the Philippines continues to see gains in PrEP coverage and enrollment in all sites offering PrEP. As reported by the national Epidemiology Bureau, 15,719 new clients enrolled on PrEP in 2023, compared to 4,263 new clients in 2021—a 269% increase. Of the total 38,276 people enrolled on PrEP in the country from March 2021 through May 2024, 89% (37,074) were from the three EpiC-supported regions.<sup>12</sup> The steady increase in number of individuals newly enrolled on PrEP by EpiC is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Number of individuals newly enrolled on PrEP by EpiC-supported sites to prevent HIV infection, January 2021–June 2024**



## Preparing to expand PrEP choice

In 2022, WHO added injectable PrEP—in the form of long-acting cabotegravir injection (CAB-LA) every two months—to the list of recommended PrEP options for people at risk of HIV and released associated guidelines for CAB-LA. As co-chair of the WHO Guidelines Development Group for CAB-LA committee, LoveYourself supported the development of these guidelines. CAB-LA has since been approved by the Philippines FDA, and LoveYourself is laying the groundwork for the introduction of injectable PrEP in the country.

More recently, results of the PURPOSE trials demonstrated safety and efficacy of lenacapavir as an alternative PrEP option offered via longer-acting, twice-a-year injection—potentially improving adherence and further expanding HIV prevention options. Gilead Sciences plans to seek regulatory approval for lenacapavir as PrEP, aiming for a 2025 launch. Together with EpiC, LoveYourself is planning a demonstration study to assess the feasibility and acceptability of introducing injectable PrEP. This study comes because of an initial formative assessment in the EpiC-supported regions, where it was found that injectable PrEP was highly preferred over oral PrEP. In addition, LoveYourself has advocated with PEPFAR to make the Philippines one of the first countries in Asia to receive CAB-LA through PEPFAR funding.

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