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SUCCESS STORY

Champions for Positive Living Encourage Sex Workers to Begin or Restart Treatment



LINKAGES has been working in Angola since January 2015 to support the government, the Angola National Institute against HIV and AIDS (INLS), and civil society to reduce HIV transmission among key populations and to improve their enrollment and retention in HIV care. The project is partnering with Associação Solidariedade Cristã e Ajuda Mútua (ASCAM) — a civil society organization in the capital of Luanda — to specifically reach sex workers with HIV counseling and testing services, sexually transmitted infection services, and treatment and follow-up at hot spots.

Together, LINKAGES and ASCAM have been successfully reaching sex workers and providing counseling and testing services. What has been more challenging is following up with sex workers who test positive for HIV and may be in need of beginning or restarting antiretroviral treatment. Because of the nature of their work, some sex workers have not provided contact information to the counselors. Of the 66 sex workers who have tested positive thus far, a staggering 50 were initially lost to follow-up.

In an effort to resolve this challenge, the LINKAGES team with ASCAM initially came up with a strategy in which the counselors who had tested the HIV-positive women would go to their respective hot spots when they knew the women would be there. The counselors would talk to each woman individually to convince her to have her CD4 count taken and to help set up a consultation for her at a local health facility. But unfortunately, this strategy worked for only a limited number of women.

Five members of key populations in Angola gather with LINKAGES staff during a training on how to become a champion for positive living.

Photo credit: Celma Pedro, LINKAGES/Angola



The next strategy — which has been far more effective — was to bring in champions of positive living from a local association of HIV-positive women. The association, called Mwenho, is a new partner with LINKAGES in Angola. The champions are not sex workers but women living with HIV who can help other HIV-positive women see that being diagnosed with HIV is not a death sentence.

The champions for positive living worked with ASCAM to create a two-pronged strategy to reach sex workers who had tested positive and were lost to follow-up. While the ASCAM counselors had the knowledge of how to reach the sex workers at the hot spots, the champions had the shared experience of being HIV-positive and thus could demonstrate firsthand that life after an HIV-positive result is possible. The champions were also all trained on issues such as stigma and discrimination, gender identity, sexual orientation, and helping patients accept their positive status and manage their own treatment.

On February 23, 2016, a pregnant sex worker named Sarah* was tested for HIV through LINKAGES in Luanda. When she found out her HIV status, Sarah did not want to talk about it, or even accept that it was true. Eventually, the LINKAGES team brought in a champion named Mitange.

“The first time I was taken to meet Sarah, she turned me away. But about a week later I went to the hot spot again with the counselor,” says Mitange. “I gave a presentation on HIV prevention and talked about my own HIV status and how long I have been living with HIV. The talk must have resonated with Sarah, as this time she took the initiative to seek me out herself. She asked for my help to set up a consultation with a doctor, and we went together to her first appointment.”

Today both Sarah and her baby are on antiretroviral therapy, and Sarah's relationship with Mitange is thriving. “She missed a consultation with her doctor in July, but the silver lining is that she herself was the one to call me to ask for help to make a new appointment,” says Mitange.

Through stories like these, most of the HIV-positive sex workers who were initially lost to follow-up have been located. Thirty-three of them have had their CD4 counts taken, and 26 are now on antiretroviral therapy (The remaining seven do not yet require treatment according to the national antiretroviral therapy policy, need more encouragement to begin treatment, or have moved away.) LINKAGES has also made funds available to its partner organizations to ensure that both the counselors and the champions of positive living have access to a designated vehicle they can use when following up with sex workers who are in need of care and treatment.

**Name changed to protect anonymity.*