

SUCCESS STORY

In Landmark Move to Mark 15 Years of PEPFAR Support, Thai Government and LINKAGES Co-fund New Key-Population-Led Health Center in Northern Thailand

At the national level, nearly 90 percent of Thailand's HIV response is already being domestically funded, but most of that money pays for HIV services among the general population. But now, for the first time, the National Health Security Office will allocate a significant amount of money to community-based services specifically for key populations.



Left: Ribbon-cutting ceremony at the new Mplus Foundation clinic in Chiang Rai

Right: Representatives from the Chiang Rai National Health Security Office, Chiang Rai Provincial Health Office, and Mplus sign a memorandum of understanding to support community-led management of HIV and AIDS

On March 30, 2018, Thai health officials and a local community-based organization called Mplus Foundation launched the first community health center in Chiang Rai Province where HIV-related services geared toward and led by key population individuals are now available. Mplus provides appropriate, friendly health services—including HIV testing and quick access to HIV treatment—specifically for men who have sex with men (MSM), transgender women, and male sex workers (MSWs). One transgender woman who has begun frequenting the Mplus clinic services, “Nong” You,* sums up the new clinic: “This place is different from other places because the result is quicker [...] I have more knowledge and understanding about HIV/AIDS and constantly receive updated information. I'm impressed that they are an advocacy group that supports MSM, transgender women, and MSWs, so they're understanding, and the services are fast.”

At the launch ceremony, the Chiang Rai National Health Security Office, Chiang Rai Provincial Health Office, and Mplus signed a memorandum of understanding to formalize their commitment to work together to support community-led management of HIV and AIDS. This included the Thai Government's financial commitment to invest more money in the center over time, thereby decreasing reliance on U.S. Government funds.

Financial Backing Shows Government Commitment

The Mplus community-led health center is being subsidized by the Royal Thai Government, in partnership with the Linkages across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES) project. LINKAGES is funded by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The Royal Thai Government will reimburse the Mplus health center, as with all clinics and hospitals, for every person receiving HIV prevention services, such as HIV testing and referral. Mplus will also receive a small grant from Chiang Rai Hospital to implement HIV prevention activities. All services are provided free of charge, with the exception of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP).

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*“Nong” is a term that means little brother or sister and is used by all community-based supporters to refer to their peers.



U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, Glyn Davies, poses with Mplus community-based supporters at the grand opening of the Mplus clinic in Chiang Rai in northern Thailand

community-based services specifically for key populations. It is initially allocating 14 percent of its HIV-prevention service budget, or 980,000 baht (approximately US\$30,534) for the community-led HIV services in Chiang Rai Province, while PEPFAR/USAID provides approximately 86 percent, or 6,000,000 baht (approximately US\$186,947). The health center opening in Chiang Rai marks an important step in the Thai Government's efforts to ensure sustainable funding for HIV prevention, testing, and treatment services delivered by and for those at risk of HIV infection.

"This new partnership is a key milestone demonstrating Thailand's commitment to financing a community response to HIV," said U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, Glyn Davies. "This year, as the United States and Thailand celebrate 200 years of friendship, we are proud of our three generations of public health cooperation with the Kingdom and pleased to work with national health officials and communities to take, together, the final steps toward ending AIDS."

The HIV epidemic in Thailand has declined dramatically over the past two decades as a result of successful HIV prevention programs implemented by the Thai Government in partnership with local communities and with support from PEPFAR. In fact, 2018 marks 15 years of PEPFAR support to the country to halt new infections and help those living with HIV to start and remain on treatment.

"The new Mplus clinic is a great example of the government-supported and co-financed key-population-led health services model for ensuring access to HIV services for all citizens," said Dr. Praphan Phanuphak, director of the Thai Red Cross AIDS Research Centre. "We believe this model can be replicated across Thailand as well as in other countries."

The Key-Population-Led Health Services Program

A part of the key-population-led health services (KPLHS) model, which has been in operation since 2015, the Mplus center is being staffed primarily by well-trained MSM and transgender women with similar demographic and HIV risk backgrounds to the people they serve. As a matter of principle, these KPLHS clinics are nondiscriminatory, tailored, and responsive to the needs of key populations, and focused on the principles of availability, accessibility, and acceptability. These community-based supporters do it all: provide HIV counseling, conduct testing for STIs including rapid testing for HIV, report test results to clients, screen clients for tuberculosis, and provide both PrEP and PEP services. Although the Mplus community health center in Chiang Rai does not provide antiretroviral therapy (ART), clients who are found to be living with HIV are being referred to one of the 17 hospitals in the province to start treatment quickly, with the goal being same-day initiation of treatment. For all clients who test for HIV during the daytime and are found to be living with HIV, care staff accompany them from the clinic to the hospital to access ART. Those who test positive during evening outreach activities are followed up by phone to arrange a time and place to meet so that staff can accompany them to the hospital.

"Nong" Em, an MSM patron of Mplus, describes his experience there: "From counseling by staff, who understand who we are, to being engaged in activities in my own community, [Mplus] provides support for MSM and transgender women and a safe space for our expression, while increasing the chances for us to live longer and healthier. There are also other friendly health check-up services for my friends and me."