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SUCCESS STORY

Moving toward 95-95-95 in Suriname via
Community-Based, Customized Care

Building partnerships with health and non-health service providers to complement CSO capacity was deemed essential for health navigation, as was building partnerships with the private sector.



Discussion on personal and work-related rights and legal advice at a social gathering organized by Suriname Men United

Photo credit: Suriname Men United

If there is one thing three civil society organizations (CSOs) working with key populations in Suriname have learned, it is that health is not always the first priority of key populations who are at increased risk of contracting HIV. Key populations for HIV in Suriname are men who have sex with men (MSM), transgender people, and female sex workers (FSWs).

Chances for Life, Suriname Men United, and Plus.sr are the three CSOs working with the USAID- and PEPFAR-funded Linkages across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES) project in Suriname. These CSOs originally sought to offer strictly HIV-related services to increase HIV prevention reach, testing rates, and enrollment and retention in care and treatment among key populations. But it soon became apparent that issues of homelessness, unemployment, violence, and the well-being of families took precedence for key populations over attending to their health needs, including any HIV-related concerns. Therefore, as the three CSOs sought to help move the country toward the UNAIDS 95-95-95 goals, they shifted from an HIV-service-oriented approach to a holistic, differentiated, needs-based care approach through their health navigation program at the community level. In turn, they hoped that this would translate into increased uptake of HIV services.

According to Tania Kambel-Codrington, Chief Executive Officer of Chances for Life, “It was necessary for us to regularly sensitize staff to the everyday realities of our target populations and to the organization’s mission and vision to ensure that everyone has a common understanding of objectives to be reached. It was imperative for us to include economic empowerment activities within our HIV program because poverty is increasing sex workers’ vulnerability to HIV. We looked at the current needs of our target population, and it was of primary importance to shift our organization’s focus from a predominantly health organization to a development organization, with health as an entry point to development.”

As they worked to create this shift toward a more holistic approach, each CSO developed distinct strategies for its health navigation program to meet clients’ needs, which they continually evaluate using monthly data to inform program adjustments and determine whether their respective strategies are having an effect on the HIV cascade.

Chances for Life, for example, schedules safe spaces at different times for each key population to learn more about their distinct needs. Then they develop interventions like “Another Chance,” which provides opportunities for key population members to work and build savings.

Marc* is a health navigation champion currently employed at the Chances for Life safe space. Champions are members of the health navigation team who are adherent to HIV medications and assist health navigators by facilitating support group sessions. Depending on their individual life stories, they may also help others in a situation similar to theirs, such as people who have experienced violence or who use drugs. Marc attributes transformations in his life to the organization. "I was brought to Chances for Life by my friends because I was HIV positive, homeless, high on drugs, and in need of treatment. However, my greatest desire was to quit using drugs and to take care of my wife and children. Today, I can say that I have successfully completed a detox program, reunited with my family, and I also have a steady job. Last but not least, I am adherent to my HIV meds."

Suriname Men United offers transgender clients occasions such as movie nights to discuss issues of acceptance within the family and society. The organization also holds social gatherings for MSM and transgender clients to develop self-empowerment skills and increase their sexual health awareness, as well as knowledge of their rights, a safe, informal setting — with the goal of improving the uptake of HIV services.

One frequent transgender participant in the gatherings says that they are "are fun, educational events. They are not just about health and sexuality, but about everyday things that we [transgender people] are dealing with. At the events you can be yourself, express how you feel, and I think that's great. What stays with me the most is that the first time I visited an event, I could come as a lady and be myself."

For its part, Plus.sr offers support group sessions focusing on self-esteem and skills building for HIV-positive clients at their community safe space. For example, John,* a client at Plus.sr, was depressed, unemployed, and dependent on others to meet his basic needs when he started participating in the support group sessions. He began attending the sessions frequently, as well as getting individual coaching. With the help of the coach, he found a job, bought a bicycle, and was soon proud to be able to support himself.

Based on their growing understanding of clients' primary needs, the CSOs also redefined their network partners to better serve their clients. Building partnerships with health and non-health service providers to complement CSO capacity was deemed essential for health navigation, as was building partnerships with the private sector. A private philanthropic partner now supports Chances for Life to provide meals and hygiene packages to substance users, people in conflict with the law, sex workers, and people living with HIV. Chances for Life has also signed a memorandum of understanding with a hospital to provide antenatal care to pregnant FSWs, followed by postnatal care. The organization's JARA Initiative helps FSWs develop employment skills, resulting in improved self-esteem among the FSWs and better school results among their children.

Experience and data have shown that once priority needs are addressed, the health navigation team can more easily build trust with clients and advance with HIV treatment and care. At all stages of HIV service projects, the priority needs of the beneficiaries, as expressed directly by those individuals, should be taken into consideration and influence the package of services. Engagement with the key populations themselves, health and non-health service providers, and the private sector are key ingredients of the approach of the LINKAGES Suriname health navigation program, which is contributing to optimal use of HIV services to reach the 95-95-95 goals.

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