

Success Story: EpiC and Partners Introduce Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis in Ghana

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Key Messages

- PrEP was successfully introduced in Ghana to key populations and serodiscordant couples through the collaboration of national government partners, local key-population-led community-based organizations, and USAID/PEPFAR-funded partners.
- Leadership among key population CSOs and members, as well as pent-up demand for PrEP within key population communities, resulted in PrEP initiation that was both immediate and high.
- PrEP implementation progressed quickly thanks to the high degree of political will among national, local, and international partners, resulting in rapid approval of the country's PrEP operational guide and PEPFAR's "jump-start" strategy.
- Solutions to emerging barriers were implemented rapidly, such as subsidizing laboratory fees, providing PrEP refills in the community, and supporting clients to manage side effects, which eased bottlenecks and ignited initiation rates.

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for preventing HIV infection is now available to key populations in Ghana in areas supported by the Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project (Greater Accra and Ashanti regions) through the Key Population Investment Fund (KPIF) and in the Western Region through JSI. Following clinical trials that found tenofovir disoproxil fumarate/emtricitabine (TDF/FTC) and tenofovir disoproxil fumarate/lamivudine (TDF/3TC) effective for HIV prevention when taken daily, and later trials demonstrating event-driven PrEP as also effective for men who have sex only with other men, country health authorities began the complex task of deciding how to incorporate it into their HIV programs and identifying whom to target as beneficiaries. Along with JSI, the EpiC and KPIF projects, which are funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and led by FHI 360, are helping advance the country's PrEP implementation efforts in collaboration with Government of Ghana, Global Fund, and local partners (Table 1).

Preparing for PrEP Delivery in Ghana

Preparation for PrEP delivery in Ghana began when the Ghana Health Service through the National AIDS/STI Control Program (NACP) included PrEP in the *Consolidated Guidelines for HIV Care in Ghana* issued in August 2019. EpiC then organized the national-level PrEP and HIV Self-Testing Implementation Committee, chaired by NACP and the Ghana AIDS Commission (GAC) and comprised of local, national, and international stakeholders including the World Health Organization, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), USAID, the National PLHIV Association, PEPFAR implementing partners and subpartners, and the private sector. Its mandate was to facilitate the implementation of PrEP and HIV self-testing in Ghana from policy development to rollout, beginning with PEPFAR's jump-start strategy which will later feed into national scale-up of both strategies. The committee's work included collaborating with the Ghana Health Service to review drafts of its *ABC of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP): Ghana Implementation Guide*, finalized in October 2020, which laid out an initial road map for governmental, nongovernmental, and private health institutions in Ghana to begin offering daily PrEP to members of the population at risk of HIV infection. Event-driven PrEP is also covered in the guide and may be rolled out at a later date.

In addition to organizing the committee, EpiC provided facilitators and financing for a master training of trainers on PrEP implementation at the national level and a subsequent series of step-down trainings with its two partners, West Africa AIDS Foundation (WAAF) and Ghana-West Africa Program to Combat AIDS and STI (WAPCAS). Trainers from EQUIP Health Ghana also helped facilitate the trainings. In turn, WAAF and WAPCAS trained the volunteer peer educators, peer navigators, and case managers of their subpartners on the roles they would play in PrEP implementation and the skills and tools they would need.

WAAF and Subpartners Initiate First PrEP Clients

WAAF, a private sector partner, was the first of the two EpiC partners to begin offering PrEP. In August 2020, WAAF initiated the first individuals on daily PrEP at its on-site clinic in Accra, called the International Health Care Center (IHCC), as well as through its mobile clinics. While IHCC provides services for a broad spectrum of infectious and chronic diseases, WAAF focuses primarily on HIV and tuberculosis. These include services "friendly" to key populations: men who have sex with men and transgender people, who are largely willing to come to the IHCC facility, and female sex workers, who prefer mobile services in the community.



Being introduced to PrEP has been timely for me! My boyfriend and I went to IHCC for PrEP. I didn't know my boyfriend's status, and he also didn't know his status. After we were tested during the screening for PrEP, my boyfriend was HIV positive, and I tested negative. We both received education and how to be safe, and he received his ARVs while I received my PrEP drugs."

—Transgender woman reached through HAF



HAF project staff attend EpiC orientation meeting August 3, 2020.

Photo credit: Andrew Teye, HAF Project Coordinator

Men who have sex with men have long advocated for PrEP to be made available in Ghana, but transgender people and female sex workers had had less exposure to PrEP at the time it was presented to them as an option. Providing information about PrEP would therefore be an important component of demand creation.

Educating key population individuals unfamiliar with PrEP and enrolling those interested has been a group effort. WAAF collaborates with two key-population-led subpartners, Hope Alliance Foundation (HAF) and Worldwide International Youth Organization (WIYO), on community engagement, outreach, demand creation, and link to PrEP services. HAF works with men who have sex with men and transgender people, while WIYO targets female sex workers. Peer educators and case managers from the two organizations operate mobile hotlines and use social media—WhatsApp, Grindr, Instagram, and Twitter for men who have sex with men and transgender people, and WhatsApp and Facebook for female sex workers—to introduce people to PrEP and connect with individuals who might be eligible. Peer educators and case managers refer men who have sex with men and transgender individuals who are potential PrEP clients to IHCC, either escorting each person to the facility or sharing the contact information of clinic nurses so individuals can make the link on their own according to their preference. Female sex workers are invited to weekly group sessions at the mobile site for PrEP initiation and follow-up, as traveling to IHCC is a challenge. WAAF also started PrEP champion groups to support adherence.

WAPCAS and Subpartners Initiate PrEP Clients

WAPCAS, a Global Fund prime recipient and EpiC partner, started initiating PrEP with its clients in three facilities in the Greater Accra Region and two facilities in the Ashanti Region in October 2020. EQUIP Health Ghana helped prepare the facilities to roll out PrEP services by conducting capacity-building with the facility staff, and continues to provide ongoing technical support, coaching, and mentorship.

To create demand for PrEP, WAPCAS partners with two subrecipients under the Global Fund grant: Pro-Link, a key-population-led organization that works with female sex workers in three facilities in the Greater Accra Region, and Centre for Popular and Education and Human Rights – Ghana (CEPEHRG), which focuses on men who have sex with men in both the Greater Accra and Ashanti regions. The trained peer educators, case managers, and other volunteers from WAPCAS and these two organizations educate key population individuals about what PrEP is, where it is available, and how to access PrEP services. Their demand-creation approaches include one-on-one and group meetings with both key population groups they serve, as well as the use of social media, particularly for CEPEHRG's efforts with men who have sex with men. Their volunteers refer and accompany people interested in PrEP to the appropriate facility for screening and initiation, if eligible. Later, peer educators and case managers follow up with those who have become PrEP users.



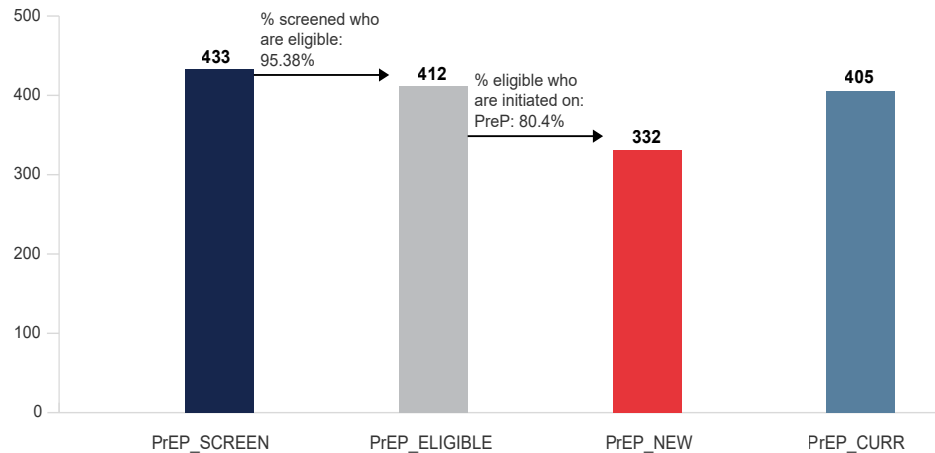
Head nurse Guro Sorensen provides PrEP services in IHCC/WAAF's mobile clinic van.

Photo credit: Abena Anim-Adjei, Program Officer, WAAF

PrEP Results

The interest in PrEP among key populations has been substantial, as seen in the collective results for PrEP among men who have sex with men, transgender people, and female sex workers initiated through both WAAF and WAPCAS from October through December 2020 (Figure 1). Female sex workers comprised the largest number of enrollees (n=257), followed by men who have sex with men (n=72) and transgender people (n=2). One other individual at high risk of HIV was also initiated on PrEP.

Figure 1. PrEP results for all key population clients, WAAF and WAPCAS, October–December 2020



Strategies to Increase PrEP Uptake and Retention

The teams at WAAF, WAPCAS, EQUIP Health Ghana, and EpiC have been working to address barriers as they emerge. An early barrier for WAAF was that their clients were originally responsible for the cost of laboratory tests for PrEP initiation and monitoring. IHCC was already offering the tests at the reduced fees of GHS 40–GHS 60 (US\$6.93–US\$10.39), but many clients cited inability or unwillingness to pay these fees. In September 2020, FHI 360 began covering these costs through EpiC for individuals who qualify for the subsidies based on their weekly income.

Similar to WAAF's experience, WAPCAS has also encountered challenges related to fees for laboratory tests. FHI 360 is likewise subsidizing these fees for qualifying PrEP beneficiaries. Although this system has worked well with men who have sex with men clients, female sex workers have found the criteria for affordability problematic. The WAPCAS/Pro-Link teams are working closely with female sex workers to educate them on the relevance of PrEP for protecting them against HIV infection. Advocacy is currently being conducted at the national level for the government to provide these tests at no cost to clients, just as it does for same-day initiation of antiretroviral therapy for clients who test positive.

WAAF and WAPCAS have also identified the need to focus on adherence among clients who have successfully initiated PrEP. Staff have found that close monitoring of PrEP clients with frequent reminder calls and text messages to take the daily pill and retrieve refills is effective, as is assistance with follow-up from the mobile clinic. Lay workers have also begun providing PrEP refills in the community as part of differentiated service delivery, a model which could be scaled up. In addition, WAAF and WAPCAS staff are focusing on counseling clients about the management of side effects, which have caused some to discontinue PrEP.

After initial strong interest in PrEP among key population individuals, WAAF and WAPCAS saw a drop in PrEP continuation about two months into use. This result was due to side effects and the challenge of taking pills on a daily basis.



"I live in the seater community. A friend told me about an organization she met on social media who introduced her to a medicine called PrEP. She said this medicine was helping her against HIV and has boosted her confidence, so I asked her to introduce me to them. I know some friends who are struggling with HIV and STIs for some years now and, knowing our job is a risky one and struggling with financial problems for the past years, I was interested.

One morning, she took me to meet the Executive Director. I told her my problem, and she told me the medicine called PrEP can help me. I was interested but didn't have money to pay for the labs. She took my information and visited me at the place where I stay. She later called me to inform me that the organization had been told of my situation and so the project will take up the lab cost. I was very happy, because I know I am at risk and had no choice. That same day I met with the mobile clinic, and I was screened and was offered PrEP. So far so good. I thank God, because I call it a miracle. I did not think there will be any medicine to prevent HIV. Now I am confident in my daily activities, and I took it upon myself to tell my peers, too. I have been able to talk to five of my peers and three are willing to take up PrEP."

**—26-year-old
female sex worker,
WAAF client**

Demand creation and expanding to other key population networks will be necessary to continue the success achieved to date. Both partners are planning strategies to encourage PrEP uptake and retention. One consists of dissemination on WhatsApp and Facebook of local-language videos and audio spots of key population "PrEP champions" sharing their positive experiences with taking PrEP. The PrEP champions are also being asked to facilitate the support groups currently being organized to encourage retention among PrEP users.



Want to talk privately to a **LGBT-friendly** clinical professional about PrEP? These nurses from the West African Aids Foundation (WAAF-IHCC) are more than happy to help and keep things confidential! Reach out!





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Digital cards created by HAF to provide key population individuals with direct access to IHCC nurses.





Image credit: Andrew Teye, HAF Project Coordinator

Next Steps

Key results, lessons learned, and best practices from both EpiC and JSI's implementation of the jump-start strategy will inform national-level scale-up led by NACP and their partners, including Global Fund. In fact, as a Global Fund prime recipient, WAPCAS will be involved in scaling up PrEP to eight other regions in Ghana in 2021. In addition, NACP and the subcommittee on event-driven PrEP implementation are currently in discussions on how to provide this as an option for men who have sex with men in the future.

Table 1. PrEP implementation partners in Ghana

ORGANIZATION	ROLE IN PREP IMPLEMENTATION IN GHANA
EpiC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial support through PEPFAR/USAID Technical assistance on PrEP implementation in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area and Ashanti Region
JSI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial support through PEPFAR/USAID PrEP implementation in collaboration with implementing partners and public facilities in the Western Region
National AIDS/STI Control Program (NACP), Ghana Health Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy development Technical assistance on PrEP implementation to civil society organizations and public and private health facilities in the Greater Accra, Ashanti, and Western regions National scale-up
Ghana Health Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy development PrEP implementation in public health facilities in the Greater Accra, Ashanti, and Western regions National scale-up
Ghana AIDS Commission (GAC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy development Technical assistance on PrEP implementation National scale-up
EQUIP Health Ghana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical assistance to facilities, including capacity building, monitoring, mentoring, and coaching of service providers, EpiC implementing partners, and subpartners
West Africa AIDS Foundation (WAAF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EpiC private sector partner Greater Accra Region Focuses on female sex workers, men who have sex with men, and transgender people Capacity building of project staff from WAAF and its subpartners, including peer educators, case managers, lay counselors, and health care workers PrEP implementation, including demand creation via social media and PrEP service delivery at the International Health Care Center (IHCC), WAAF's private clinic
International Health Care Center (IHCC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WAAF's private clinic in Accra Service provider for a range of infectious and chronic diseases, including HIV
Worldwide International Youth Organization (WIYO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key-population-led subpartner of WAAF Focuses on female sex workers Community engagement, outreach, demand creation through social media, and linkage to PrEP services at IHCC (WAAF's private clinic in Accra)
Hope Alliance Foundation (HAF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key-population-led subpartner of WAAF Focuses on men who have sex with men and transgender people Community engagement, outreach, demand creation through social media, and linkage to PrEP services at IHCC (WAAF's private clinic in Accra)
Ghana-West Africa Program to Combat AIDS and STI (WAPCAS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EpiC partner, Global Fund principal recipient Greater Accra and Ashanti regions Focuses on female sex workers Capacity building of project staff from WAPCAS and its subpartners, including peer educators, case managers, and health care workers PrEP implementation, including community engagement, outreach, demand creation, and linkage to PrEP services at three public health facilities in the Greater Accra Region and two public health facilities in the Ashanti Region
Pro-Link	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key-population-led subpartner of WAPCAS in Greater Accra Metropolitan Area Focuses on female sex workers Community engagement, outreach, demand creation, and linkage to PrEP services at three public health facilities
Centre for Popular Education and Human Rights – Ghana (CEPEHRG)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key-population-led subpartner of WAPCAS in Greater Accra and Ashanti regions Focuses on men who have sex with men Community engagement, outreach, demand creation, and linkage to PrEP services at three public health facilities in the Greater Accra Region and two public health facilities in the Ashanti Region

 USAID/PEPFAR partners
  Ghana government partners
  Local nongovernmental partners
  Subpartners of local nongovernmental partners

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