

The road to oral PrEP rollout among key populations in Liberia

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In November 2020, the USAID- and PEPFAR-supported Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project began laying the groundwork for introducing oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in Liberia, with a specific focus on meeting the prevention needs of key populations. Despite some initial concerns about oral PrEP from policymakers, providers, implementing partners and end users alike, the country is now poised to scale up access to this proven HIV prevention intervention.






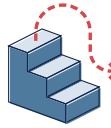

Some of the early concerns toward oral PrEP use were that it would lead to a decrease in condom use, that users would suffer side effects from the medication, and that there was a potential for drug resistance if not taken properly. Some stakeholders were also uncomfortable administering an ARV-based medication to HIV-negative clients.

Deeply rooted stigma and discrimination toward key populations — especially men who have sex with men (MSM), female sex workers (FSWs), and transgender people — also limited early support for oral PrEP rollout. However, with technical assistance from EpiC, the National AIDS/STI Control Program (NACP) and the National AIDS Commission of Liberia (NAC) have made steady progress in overcoming these barriers and preparing for oral PrEP introduction in policy and practice. This brief outlines key milestones achieved on the road to oral PrEP introduction in Liberia (see Table 1).

EpiC Liberia worked closely with national stakeholders to build consensus and support for oral PrEP introduction in the country, develop national guidelines, and begin building the capacity of health care providers to offer oral PrEP services. The guidelines for use of oral PrEP and the step-down trainings have laid the groundwork for oral PrEP rollout for key populations, which began being offered in April 2022. In the first three months of implementation, 600 clients have initiated PrEP. EpiC Liberia will continue to support the NACP and NAC, as well other implementing partners, to provide high-quality oral PrEP services as an approach to preventing HIV among key populations.



TABLE 1: Key programmatic milestones preparing for oral PrEP rollout in Liberia

KEY MILESTONE	TIMEFRAME	ACHIEVEMENTS
 <p>1 Development of an oral PrEP roadmap</p>	December 2020 – February 2021	EpiC Liberia held multiple consultations with the NACP and the NAC to develop a national roadmap for the introduction of oral PrEP in Liberia. The roadmap includes information required to formulate policy guidance and translate it into practice for the delivery of oral PrEP as an acceptable, feasible, and sustainable HIV prevention intervention.
 <p>2 Stakeholder consultations</p>	February – April 2021	EpiC Liberia organized two stakeholder meetings with the Ministry of Health (MoH), NAC, NACP, USAID, U.S. Department of Defense, FHI 360, Partners in Health, UNAIDS, WHO, UNICEF, and community-based organizations (CBOs) to strengthen buy-in for oral PrEP rollout in the country and address any concerns from stakeholders.
 <p>3 Development and validation of national oral PrEP guidelines</p>	August 2021	EpiC Liberia convened a broad set of stakeholders to review processes to safely introduce and monitor the use of oral PrEP in Liberia. These meetings led to the development and validation of national oral PrEP guidelines, titled Step-by-Step with Oral PrEP in Liberia. The guidelines were published and circulated widely among the MoH, U.S. Government (USG), and Global Fund (GF) implementing partners.
 <p>4 Creation of an oral PrEP Technical Working Group (TWG) with NACP as secretariat</p>	September – October 2021	EpiC Liberia supported NACP in establishing an oral PrEP TWG. The TWG coordinates quarterly oral PrEP review meetings, which help monitor the implementation and performance of oral PrEP among eligible populations in all counties. The TWG designed a hub and spoke model for facility and community dispensing of oral PrEP and manages PrEP commodity sourcing. The TWG also oversaw design and delivery of the master and step-down trainings in oral PrEP delivery.
 <p>5 Training of oral PrEP master trainers</p>	September 2021	EpiC supported NACP to convene a two-day master training for 23 participants selected from MoH program staff, health workers from high volume ART clinics, implementing partners, CBOs working with key and priority populations, UNAIDS, and donor agencies (including the USG and the Global Fund). Participants who received a score of 75% and above at the end of training assessment were certified by the NACP to support step-down training for providers of oral PrEP at service delivery points.
 <p>6 Step-down training in oral PrEP delivery</p>	January 2022	EpiC, NACP, and the oral PrEP TWG supported the first step-down training for selected providers of oral PrEP at 11 local priority CBOs and their 11 linked health facilities. Facilities were selected based on the patronage of key populations for other HIV services.
 <p>7 Development of an oral PrEP commodity management system</p>	February – March 2022	With the hub and spoke PrEP dispensing model set up by the TWG, each of the CBOs (spokes) involved in PrEP delivery has an oral PrEP focal person who is linked to a facility (hub) from where they request and obtain PrEP commodities. The facility hubs, in turn, request oral PrEP commodities from NACP, and the NACP works with central medical stores to acquire specific quantities of commodities.