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## SUCCESS STORY

# A new ART Center to continue transforming the lives of people living with HIV

HIV Services and System Strengthening project



## BACKGROUND

“We have been working for more than 22 years to contribute to the eradication of the HIV pandemic in the Dominican Republic and today, thanks to this tremendous effort, we have finally achieved certification to offer comprehensive health services to the population,” highlights Maritza Valenzuela, Country Director of the organization AID for AIDS (AFA).

AID for AIDS (AFA), is an implementing partner for the HIV Services and System Strengthening project, funded by the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the Agency of the United States for International Development (USAID) in the Dominican Republic.

AFA arrived in the country in 1996 and officially registered as an NGO in 2002. It began its operations through "Access to Treatment" programs and the "Comprehensive care program for children and adolescents with HIV or AIDS," where AFA carried out activities such as: ensuring delivery of ARV drugs to vulnerable patients, training health personnel in the correct care of HIV patients and providing

psychological care for HIV patients and their families.

AFA also developed a program to prevent HIV in young adolescents, as well as strategies for behavioral change.

With a view to continue its hard work in the Dominican Republic, in 2008 AFA began a collaboration with the pediatric Robert Read Cabral Hospital. Through this effort, guidance and emotional and social support are provided to children and adolescents living with HIV and their families, in addition to strengthening adherence to medical treatments.

## INTERVENTION

In 2018, AFA opened “Tu Salud” (Your Health) which functioned as a private clinic in the eastern zone of Santo Domingo. In 2019, AFA was integrated as a partner in the USAID HIV Services and System Strengthening project

which initiated the necessary procedures with the MOH to certify AFA as an official ART center. During 2019, the project helped equip “Tu Salud” to be able to function at full capacity, providing HIV services to the Haitian migrant community. Through these efforts the opening of the first ART center in eastern Santo Domingo, “Tu Salud”, was achieved!

**“Tu Salud” is supported by ten health care providers who offer the following services:**

- HIV testing and counseling
- Initiation of ARV treatment
- Viral load tests
- TB testing, care, and follow-up
- Psychological care
- Gynecology services
- Services for pregnant women, breastfeeding women and their children
- Diabetes clinical care
- Nutritional support
- Support for the purchase of non-ARV drugs, etc.

In Q1 FY20, AFA initiated 105 Haitian migrants on HIV treatment with an ART initiation rate of over 95%.

## OUTCOMES

Tu Salud has come to join this shared responsibility to eradicate HIV in the Dominican Republic. Its results are evidenced in cases such as Claire\*, a young, 19 year old woman of Haitian nationality, who has two small children: one 4 years old and the other 9 months old. “The youngest child was in a delicate state of health, malnutrition could be noted. When she arrived at the SAI, the young woman didn’t want her or her son to be treated,” according to Maritza Valenzuela, Country Director of AID FOR AIDS.

“I remember that we had to convince her to be able her children, she was in total denial. It was very difficult for us to persuade her to come to the center so that we could test her children,” she explains. “Although the older child was negative the youngest child's test came back HIV positive as we expected, and we immediately initiated HIV treatment and care with the pediatrician and the nutritionist.”

“The greatest achievement was working with the young woman to visit the center regularly. On her second visit she agreed to be tested, she was afraid, and it was evident that she was already in the AIDS stage. After obtaining a positive result, we did all baseline tests, provided psychological assistance and began ARV treatment,” explains Maritza.

“Today we can see the change made after receiving care at AFA; we take care of her as if we were her family, and she talks a lot with us, she trusts us.”

Tu Salud will continue to transform the lives of people who need it most, as evidenced in the story of Claire and her family: "It motivates me to serve, I cannot remain calm if someone has a need, be it health or otherwise". Maritza also highlights that: "More people are needed who work with love, who give service from the heart, heart is what moves the staff of AFA".

*\*Name changed*

*Photo Credit: Maritza Valenzuela, Country Director AFA*

*Photo 1: Client arriving at AFA.*

*Photo 2: Client in follow-up consultation at AFA.*

