

# LINKAGES AND EpiC BARBADOS

## *Summary of Achievements*

*June 2016 – July 2020*

From June 2016 to June 2019, the Linkages across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES) project was implemented in Barbados in partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs), government stakeholders, and key population (KP) individuals, with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Between October 2019 and July 2020, the work supported through LINKAGES was transitioned to and continued under the USAID- and PEPFAR-funded Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project. Together, the LINKAGES and EpiC projects in Barbados succeeded in delivering community-tailored programming across the HIV prevention, care, and treatment cascade for female sex workers (FSWs), men who have sex with men (MSM), and transgender people. The projects expanded access to one-stop-shop services in community “safe spaces” and engaged members of KP groups in developing and implementing their own solutions to barriers to getting tested for HIV and initiating and adhering to antiretroviral therapy (ART). This brief summarizes the achievements of the LINKAGES and EpiC projects in Barbados.

## BACKGROUND

In the small but densely populated country of Barbados, an estimated 2,700 people are living with HIV. Overall, 90% of those living with HIV are aware of their status; however, treatment coverage remains limited with only 52% enrolled. KPs are disproportionately affected by the epidemic in Barbados. Data for FSWs and trans people are not available, however, the estimated HIV prevalence among MSM is 2.8% compared to 0.8% in the general adult population.<sup>1</sup>

KP members commonly experience stigma, discrimination, and violence, which poses major barriers to accessing health services.<sup>2</sup> A survey on stigma in 2014 showed that the vast majority of Barbadians see human rights as important, but almost 30% of respondents noted that they would hide it if they were homosexual, and more than 80% said it would be embarrassing if their child were a sex worker.<sup>2</sup>

The LINKAGES and EpiC projects in Barbados were designed to strengthen the national response to the

## Highlights

- Provided technical support for social media and social network interventions that increased reach and recruitment of KP members into services
- Extended HIV testing and counseling to KPs and improved linkage to and retention in care and treatment via peer navigators
- Established referrals to STI and other sexual and reproductive health services, psychosocial care and support, legal aid, and support for and prevention of gender-based violence
- Defined the scope for CSO engagement in the provision of HIV services, which was incorporated into the national approach known as “Shared Care”
- Supported two community organizations—CEED and EQUALS—in strengthening capacity offered through drop-in centers
- Helped establish EQUALS as the first community site to collaborate with the Ministry of Health and Wellness on the delivery of PrEP services for MSM
- Conducted eight training sessions for health care professionals and workers to provide KP-friendly services

epidemic by working with the Government of Barbados, KP leaders, local civil society organizations (CSOs), and private-sector providers to plan and implement services for sex workers, MSM, and transgender people. LINKAGES and EpiC collaborated with the Ministry of Health and Wellness (MHW) and the National HIV/AIDS Commission (NHAC) over the life of project, demonstrating the government's commitment to HIV services for KPs. The projects partnered with two local CSOs: CEED (Community Education, Empowerment and Development) and EQUALS (Empowerment, Quality, Unity, Acceptance, Love, Strength) to implement community-led services. The Barbados Family Planning Association played the important role of providing KP-friendly facility-based services to complement the community-based programming. To ensure stakeholder leadership and accountability, LINKAGES facilitated a technical steering committee comprised of these and other actors.

LINKAGES and EpiC used the HIV services cascade as the overall strategic framework for the project and implemented interventions at select steps along the cascade. In addition, the projects advanced a sustainable systems approach designed to build capacity in (1) community health delivery and navigation systems, (2) monitoring and data retrieval systems, (3) systematic comprehensive responses to stigma and discrimination at both policy and programmatic levels, and (4) active participation in the national response to health needs.

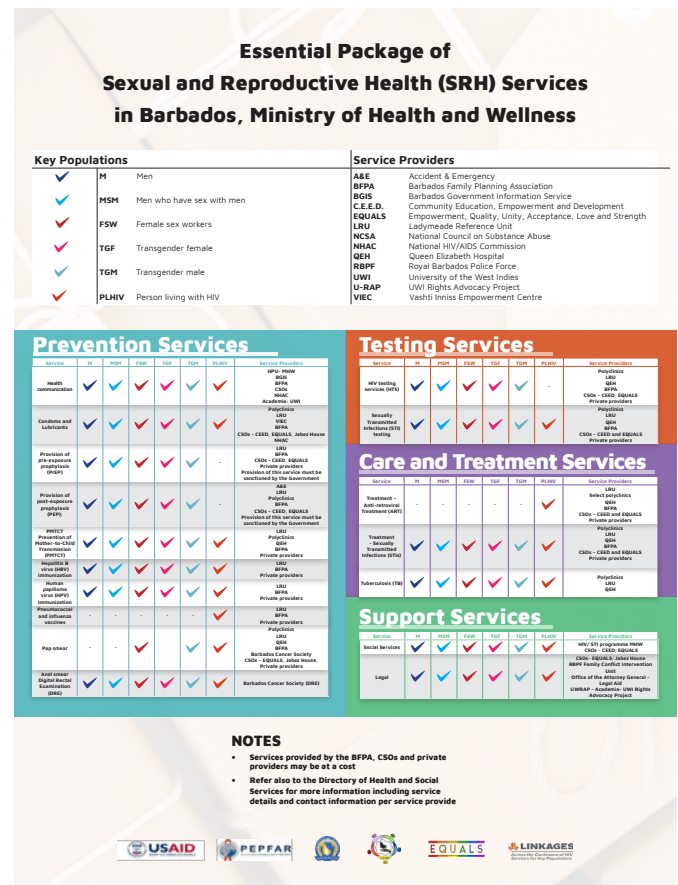
Technical support included the development of innovative social media and social network interventions to increase reach and recruitment of KP members into services. The program extended HIV testing and counseling to KPs and improved linkage to and retention in care and treatment via peer navigators; and established referrals to STI services, sexual and reproductive health services, psychosocial care and support, legal aid, and support for and prevention of gender-based violence. Efforts were also made to address the stigma and discrimination that KP members experienced when accessing services while simultaneously bringing services closer to the community.

## KEY PROGRAMMATIC ELEMENTS

### DEFINING SCOPE FOR CSO ENGAGEMENT IN HIV SERVICE DELIVERY

A critical contribution of LINKAGES to the government's National Strategic Plan for HIV was to help define the scope for CSO engagement in the provision of HIV services and incorporate it into the national approach known as "Shared Care." The CSO engagement framework focuses on the core components of community systems, all of which are considered essential for enabling community organizations to fulfill their vital role in contributing to health outcomes. These include strengthening community networks, linkages, partnerships, and coordination; and bolstering leadership capacity, community activities, and service delivery.

**Figure 1. Sexual and reproductive health services**



The framework aims to put civil society, especially organizations looking after the interests of KPs, in their rightful position: the vanguard of the national challenge to HIV.<sup>1</sup> In delivering the National HIV/STI program, the MHW prioritizes the health promotion strategy of “reorienting health services” to expand and strengthen them as well as making them more responsive to the health needs of communities and individuals. Health systems that espouse promotion must involve members of the community in their development and ensure that decisions about services result from genuine local and national participatory and consultative processes.<sup>3</sup>

### ESTABLISHING AN ESSENTIAL PACKAGE OF SERVICES

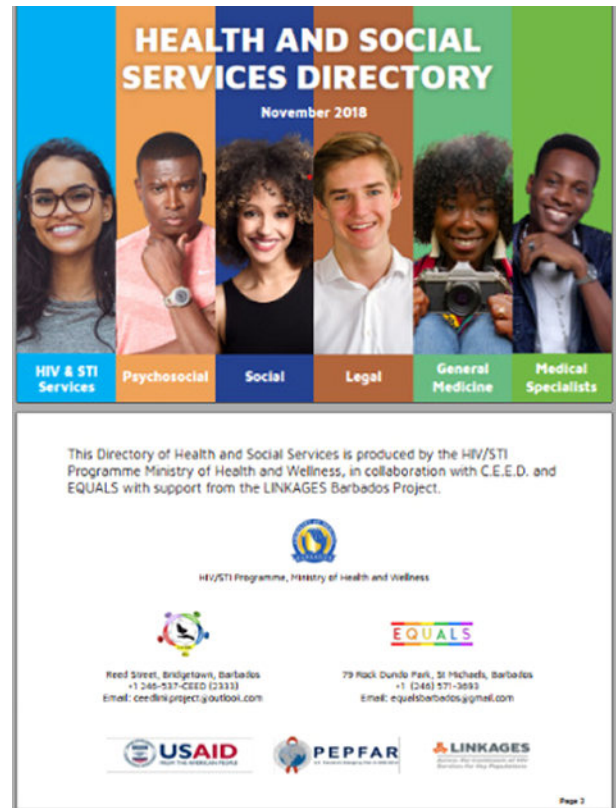
In close collaboration with MHW and other stakeholders, LINKAGES developed and validated a national essential package of services for KPs and a directory of services to support Shared Care (see Figure 1). These resources provided guidance to stakeholders including policymakers, program managers, and implementers from the public, private, and nongovernment sectors for ensuring that individuals had access to the necessary services and support required to achieve national and global 90-90-90 HIV targets. These services are guided by the values defined by the MHW, which aim to provide client-centered services free from stigma and discrimination regardless of gender and sexual orientation.

The package followed the structure of the HIV services cascade, from prevention through viral suppression, and other services that contribute to positive health outcomes. Specifically, it included the following categories and major interventions:

1. Prevention, including the provision of health information and behavior change communication, condoms and lubricants, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), elimination of mother-to-child transmission (EMTCT), immunization, and pap smears
2. HIV testing services, including testing and counseling for HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
3. Care and treatment, including the provision of antiretroviral therapy (ART) and treatment for STIs and tuberculosis (TB)
4. Support services including psychosocial, legal, and related services that address human rights, violence, safety, and security

This package also includes national protocols that guide service delivery.

**Figure 2.** Services directory



The essential package includes a complementary directory of services for partnering with private and community-based service providers in the provision of essential sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services to KP members.

The Health and Social Services Directory (see Figure 2) is intended to:

- Provide beneficiaries and service providers with user-friendly information on a range of services for different health needs
- Improve linkage to and referral among services (by improving the awareness and uptake of services) in the directory

## STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICE DELIVERY

As many KP members prefer to access services in the community from organizations representing their needs and preferences, LINKAGES supported two community organizations in strengthening capacity for quality service delivery. CEED and EQUALS operate drop-in centers (DICs) that offer a broad range of services, complementing the public health sector. The DICs have strong referral networks in place to navigate clients to services as appropriate. Of particular note is community-based testing, with EQUALS staff trained and certified to offer rapid testing. This effort provides opportunities for community members to be tested outside of regular MHW hours and reaches “hidden” KP individuals who may not access public health facilities for fear of stigma, discrimination, or being identified.

When the Equals DIC opened in 2017, Sam\*, a 20-year-old gay male client, was tested and found positive for HIV. He said, “EQUALS has had a positive impact on my life. They provided me with an opportunity for testing, and when my result was positive, I found that the environment they create [...] significantly helped me to accept the result, seek treatment, and adhere to my medication, to the point where I have recently been discovered to have undetectable levels of virus. They create an empowering environment, and I enjoy being involved in their activities and events. I am currently helping to host the youth groups once a month, along with other people my age, to help promote safe sexual practices.”

Dr. Anton Best, senior medical officer of health for the MHW’s HIV/STI Program, praised the role EQUALS has played in efforts to bring HIV services to KPs: “The National HIV/STI program in Barbados has been in a continuous process of expanding access to high-quality HIV and STI prevention and treatment services. The advent of EQUALS represents an opportunity for strategic partnership for the MHW, allowing us to gain trust with and to reach marginalized populations in Barbados to offer these much-needed services. Through this partnership and the provision of services, we are more effective at reducing the incidence of HIV and STIs through the country and thus improving the lives and well-being of all people in Barbados.”

Other services available at the CEED and EQUALS DICs include distribution of prevention commodities, ARV treatment initiation and adherence support, PrEP, STI

screening diagnosis and treatment, and other support services including legal aid, violence prevention and response, and psychosocial support.



*Men's health fairs held at hot spot locations helped increase case finding.*

LINKAGES also worked with CEED and EQUALS to improve testing uptake among high-risk populations through strategies such as index testing, offering testing appointments online, and conducting health fairs. For example, CEED hosted monthly community-based men's health fairs where MSM who may not identify as such and do not present for HIV testing at traditional sites could receive general health screenings (i.e., blood pressure, blood sugar) as well as HIV testing.

To ensure that EQUALS and CEED programming was aligned with the Shared Care approach, LINKAGES prepared protocols, standard operating procedures, and guidelines for community service organization engagement. These included:

- Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and Guidelines for Delivering HIV Services to Key Populations (KPs) in Barbados within the Essential Package of Services

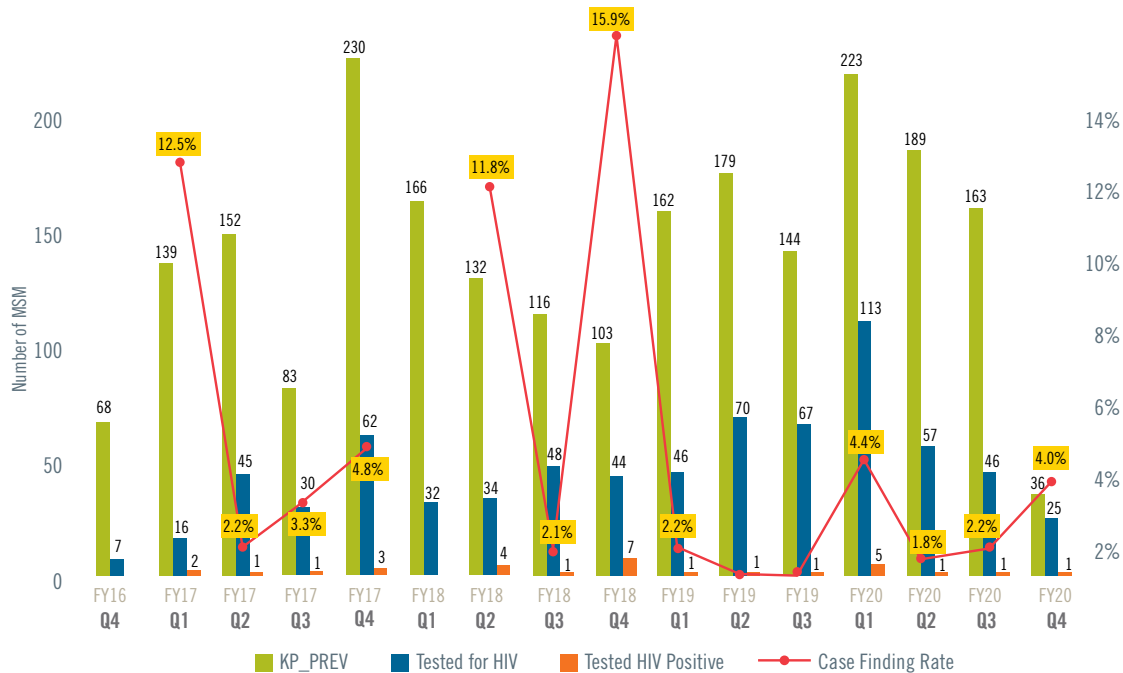
\*Pseudonym



- Standard Operating Procedures for Linkage to Care
- Standard Operating Procedures for CEED and EQUALS Community Shared Care Sites in Barbados

- Standard Operating Procedures for CEED and EQUALS Community PrEP Sites in Barbados
- Standard Operating Procedures for CEED and EQUALS Community HTC Sites in Barbados

**Figure 3. HIV testing uptake and case detection among MSM—life of project (July 2016 to July 2020)**



## SERVICE DELIVERY IMPACT

Over the life of the project, LINKAGES reached 2,217 MSM. Of those, 735 (33%) were tested for HIV and received their results. Thirty were newly diagnosed with HIV, producing a case detection rate of 4%. The project observed spikes in case finding among MSM in some quarters following the introduction of strategies such as men's health fairs in locations identified from hot spot mapping and the rollout of online outreach by EQUALS.

LINKAGES programming with FSWs and transgender people was limited to FY18. During that year, the project reached 461 FSWs, tested 245, and newly diagnosed two with HIV. The project reached 13 trans individuals, tested seven, and newly diagnosed one. For both populations, the project exceeded its reach and testing targets for the year and met its case-finding targets.

## PrEP

In support of the government's efforts to integrate PrEP into the combination prevention package, LINKAGES supported information gathering and analysis to understand the technical support needs and preferences of KPs and help tailor messaging and demand creation for PrEP. The exercise assessed awareness and attitudes toward PrEP and identified the most feasible and acceptable delivery mechanisms. The program supported the establishment of EQUALS as the first community site to collaborate with the MHW in the delivery of PrEP services for MSM. While clients are referred to the Ladymeade Reference Unit (LRU) for PrEP initiation, arrangements were made to accommodate clients to collect PrEP refills from the EQUALS site. Since the inception of this mechanism in October 2018 through March 2020, a total of 81 MSM became PrEP users through the EQUALS site.

## GOING ONLINE

Recognizing that many KP members prefer to be reached online, LINKAGES supported local partners in virtual outreach and service delivery. EQUALS launched an interactive website that uses carefully crafted messaging and tailored services to find and link KP to services. The website was further enhanced under EpiC in 2020 to include a self-guided risk assessment tool. This tool uses inputs from clients about their HIV risks to provide an autogenerated list of recommended actions and services. After completing the online risk assessment, users are navigated to an online booking tool where they can make reservations for recommended services at EQUALS.

Outreach workers (ORWs) were trained to conduct online HIV outreach, including how to use motivational communication techniques to improve the quality of outreach services delivered online. In 2020, EQUALS received technical assistance to develop an online data collection tool for use by ORWs resulting in improved efficiency and ease of use.

In July 2020, EpiC supported EQUALS to lead a south-to-south exchange with two other EpiC-supported CSOs in Guyana on their Going Online experience. This exchange culminated in a series of webinars across three weeks. EQUALS shared lessons related to generating service demand through online content and observing ethics and privacy during online engagement. EQUALS has pledged to provide continued support and guidance in the future.

In the final year of the EpiC program, the COVID-19 pandemic caused disruption to services and procurement of supplies. Implementing partners were unable to conduct testing activities as national curfews and social distancing came into effect. Online mechanisms were therefore essential in reaching and engaging with KPs. Both CEED and EQUALS ORWs enhanced the use of online platforms for outreach in March 2020 to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on physical service delivery. Of the total number of MSM reached by CEED during Q3, 61% (70/115) were reached online. For EQUALS, 100% of outreach during Q3 was online.

## STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION WORKSHOPS

Training health care professionals and workers to provide KP-friendly services and spaces was a critical element to improving the current stigma and discrimination challenges affecting the uptake of testing and other HIV and support services. Eight trainings were conducted with health care workers during the LINKAGES project. The purpose was to sensitize and educate health care and support service providers on how stigma and discrimination affect KP members and their preferred ways of seeking HIV and other services and support. The sessions were cofacilitated by members of the KP community.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### SUSTAINABILITY

LINKAGES and EpiC were implemented with an eye toward transitioning financing and technical leadership to local partners including government, civil society, and private providers. A major contribution of these projects has been the mobilization of the community sector to act as a partner to the MHW in offering alternatives to health-facility-based HIV services, and improving access to services for marginalized and historically underserved groups in Barbados.

Looking forward, the projects prioritized plans to sustain quality services delivered by an integrated network of public and private providers, helping to overcome the remaining barriers to HIV prevention, testing, and treatment for KPs. The Government of Barbados is a critical partner in this initiative.

*“The role of civil society organisations in ensuring the success of the Barbados National Strategic Plan for HIV cannot be overestimated. It is critical that approaches in the plan seek to increase and enhance their engagement in the national response and to ensure they complement Government’s efforts.”*

—NATIONAL STRATEGIC PLAN FOR HIV 2014-2018:  
INVESTING FOR RESULTS



## REFERENCES

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### ***Linkages across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES)***

Linkages across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES) is a global cooperative agreement funded by USAID through PEPFAR. Led by FHI 360 with partners Pact, IntraHealth International, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, LINKAGES has worked in more than 30 countries since 2014 to reduce HIV transmission among key populations — sex workers, men who have sex with men, transgender people, and people who inject drugs — and to improve their enrollment and retention in care.

Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) is a global cooperative agreement led by FHI 360 with core partners Right to Care, Palladium International, Population Services International (PSI), and Gobee Group. The project provides strategic technical assistance (TA) and direct service delivery (DSD) to break through barriers to 95-95-95 and promote self-reliant management of national HIV programs by improving HIV case finding, prevention, and treatment programming.

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