



## **FAST TRACK CITIES ADDRESS STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION AND SUSTAINABILITY OF SERVICES FOR PLHIV**

Viet Nam commercial hub and its most populous city is committed to the 90-90-90 targets and joined the Fast-Track city initiative in 2015. Having recently shown how integrating HIV services into the general health system was possible and recognizing that stigma and discrimination remained formidable barriers to people living with HIV and key populations, a pilot initiative was launched to reduce discrimination in health care settings.

The first step was assessment of HIV-related stigma and discrimination in three health facilities. A training program using various participatory tools and methods followed this. Critical to the success of the initiative was the engagement and participation of the Viet Nam Network of People Living with HIV with the full support of the Viet Nam Administration for HIV/AIDS Control (VAAC), the Ho Chi Minh City Provincial AIDS Center, and UNAIDS. Health workers attending the training



and developing standard operating procedures to reduce stigma and discrimination in healthcare settings at provincial and other different levels of health facilities. The

reported lower levels of fear and worrying when attending to HIV positive patients and negative attitudes towards PLHIV were reduced. Some basic hospital practices were reviewed and revised as needed and a code of practice developed in one hospital. A steering committee member of the Viet Nam PLHIV network noted: "... *Mutual understanding and better relationships were developed between PLHIV and key health care staff, and it was easier to come and seek support when connecting PLHIV to care and treatment services..*"

Thanks to this successful initiative, a national plan to reduce HIV related stigma and discrimination in health care settings was developed. It also informed a newly issued Ministry of Health's directive and technical guidelines for implementation of interventions

initiative also leveraged donor support to replicate the interventions in priority high burden provinces in 2018.

Another key national effort towards reaching 90-90-90 is the decision to include HIV treatment in Social Health Insurance (SHI) schemes. Social Health Insurance should cover 90% of the population and out of pocket health expenditure should be reduced to less than 35% by 2020. Furthermore, the government mandates expanding SHI to reach 100% of all PLHIV. Key services such as HIV testing, ARVs, drugs for opportunistic infections, CD4 counts and viral load are covered. By end 2017, more than 50% of all PLHIV were on ART and more than 80% of those had SHI.

Some barriers include limited understanding of how to access the SHI and its benefits, lack of ID documents, limited capacity to

pay the premium and fear of stigma and discrimination. Realizing this, the national programme, provincial AIDS centres and other authorities have actively promoted faster and easier enrollment in SHI including through state/provinces/city and donors' subsidies for PLHIV facing difficulty.

There are special challenges for Ho Chi Minh City. It has about 10% of the total population of Viet Nam, yet, one of our five PLHIV in Viet Nam is estimated to live in the city. Significant parts of the current population are internal migrants. By end 2017, Viet Nam reported that of about 250,000 people living with HIV nationwide 75% knew their status; 67% of those as the 86% of among the PLHIV on ART. In Ho Chi Minh City, an estimated 86% of PLHIV knew their status and 76% are on ARVs. City authorities recently expanded and subsidized SHI to temporary migrants (minimum 6 months in the city) from key populations - sex workers, men who have sex with men, transgender persons, and people who inject drugs. This ensures earlier diagnosis and treatment, improves migrants'

health, productivity and reduces HIV transmission. This was made possible through the strong leadership, flexibility and openness of the HCMC People's Committee and Health authorities combined with sensitization on these issues by the UN and other partners.

Ho Chi Minh City was the first city in Viet Nam to successfully pilot PrEP (Pre Exposure Prophylaxis) and community-lay testing (HIV testing and counseling done by community-based organization (CBO) or local NGO, where selected members or staff are trained to conduct rapid HIV screening tests in the community, CBO offices or wherever clients feel comfortable and safe). This has provided more options for key populations to know their status and protect themselves. The lessons and experiences from the pilot will inform the development of national guidelines for expansion of those services in 2018.

Along with several other homegrown measures to fast-track the response, Ho Chi Minh city's experience on reducing stigma and discrimination, integrating HIV into the general

health care system, and expanding SHI coverage to PLHIV (with special efforts to cover poorer ones and migrant key populations) is leading the way towards better care, increasing access to sustainable treatment and leaving no one behind.



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