

# HIV & COVID-19

## *The Philippine Experience*



### *Lessons from the narratives of advocates of PLHIV communities*

- *Optimal adherence to lifesaving antiretroviral therapy has been one of the major challenges of PLHIV during the Covid-19 pandemic.*
- *Collaboration among advocates, community-based organizations, government institutions, and other stakeholders helped to address HIV-related issues and concerns in the ground.*
- *Policy-driven and community empowerment approaches are key components to remodel the Philippine HIV healthcare delivery system to be more responsive and resilient amidst and after the pandemic.*

### **On the Ground:**

#### *Covid-19 Narratives and Realities of PLHIV Communities*

The Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges and difficulties to millions of lives worldwide. It made vulnerable individuals even more susceptible by causing health threats and harm while aggravating existing social, economic, political, and healthcare problems. **The communities of persons living with HIV (PLHIV) in the Philippines have been uniquely impacted by the pandemic.** To reach the global UNAIDS target of 95-95-95 by 2030, the Philippines needs to optimize efforts, interventions, and resources. Understanding the experiences of PLHIV communities during the COVID-19 pandemic can help revitalize and modify existing policies, programs, and services to achieve the UNAIDS targets.

The second of our 5-part webinar series focused on access to HIV healthcare among PLHIV communities in the Philippines during the pandemic. A roundtable discussion was used to promote free-flowing discussion of ideas, experiences, and perceptions among advocates of PLHIV. Three community leaders were invited to share their expertise: **Owie Franco, President of Pinoy Plus Advocacy Pilipinas Inc., Desi Andrew Ching, President of HIV/AIDS Support House, Inc., and Alvin Fernandez, Executive Director of Mujer-LGBT Organization Inc.** The first objective of the session was to share challenges and best practices on accessing HIV care and treatment services during the pandemic. The second objective was to determine areas for supporting delivery of services to PLHIV communities post-pandemic.

One of the major difficulties that PLHIV face during the pandemic were **challenges in adhering optimally to their lifesaving antiretroviral therapy (ART).** This concern has been brought about by community quarantine measures, and worsened by socioeconomic and logistic problems. Although **personalized ART delivery services** were implemented by organizations in some settings, scaling this approach has been a challenge due to areas with limited courier services, concerns about privacy and confidentiality protocols, and economic and employment adversity among PLHIV. In some areas, stricter quarantine protocols were implemented that require further that PLHIV present additional documents to gain entrance into their HIV clinics. Some PLHIV encountered **stigma, discrimination, and violation of HIV disclosure in quarantine checkpoints.** In addition, some HIV clinics limited the supply of ART being distributed to clients, thereby requiring more frequent clinic visits despite the difficulties of quarantine measures and the threat of COVID-19 exposure.



Figure 1. Recommendations to strengthen Philippine HIV healthcare delivery system

Several PLHIV advocates, organizations, and groups took assertive actions to go into the ground to alleviate the problem. Partnerships were formed among government organizations, healthcare facilities, funding agencies, and non-government organizations to deliver ART at the comfort of homes of PLHIV and at no cost. **Home visits were made to reach PLHIV and give them the assistance they needed.** Other types of services were launched to address issues related to mental health, human rights violations, and Covid-19 vaccination. Toward the discussion, three main points of recommendation were identified to mitigate and strengthen HIV healthcare delivery system as presented in Figure 1.



Figure 2. Key actions to strengthen Philippine HIV healthcare delivery system

In conclusion, the pandemic affected the lives of PLHIV in different ways. The challenges and needs of PLHIV communities have been mitigated and addressed through various organizations and agencies' **collaborative and compassionate efforts**. Figure 2 depicts how policy-driven and community-empowerment approaches are key components to remodel the Philippine HIV healthcare delivery system to achieve global HIV targets during and aftermath the pandemic.

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