

HIV & COVID-19

The Philippine Experience



Lessons from the stories and experiences of PLHIV subgroup representatives

- PLHIV subgroups encounter multifaceted healthcare difficulties and socioeconomic inequities during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Innovation, compassion, collaboration, and advocacy are key strategies to reach PLHIV subgroups and support their unique healthcare needs during the pandemic.
- Discoveries and developments are pathways to make the Philippine HIV healthcare delivery system more responsive, inclusive, and resilient during and after the pandemic.

Communities and Covid-19:

A Roundtable Discussion with Community-Based Organizations

To hear the voices and experiences of PLHIV subgroups, a roundtable discussion was organized in the fourth webinar conducted by UP Manila and Brown University. This method permitted a semi-structured discussion of the challenges and experiences of PLHIV subgroups during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, interventions to meet and support the needs of PLHIV subgroups were explored and examined. Gary "Papa Chen" Catalbas of The LoveYourself Inc., Jason "Jezamae" Encabo of Pilipinas Shell Foundation Inc., and Elena Felix of the Association of Positive Women Advocates, Inc. were invited to share their expertise.

PLHIV subgroups encounter several challenges related to healthcare difficulties and socioeconomic inequities. Among children living with HIV, one of the main challenges is the unavailability of pediatric services in treatment hubs. Mothers experienced anxieties and doubts in their capacity to promote safety in the preparation and administration of antiretroviral medications of their children living with HIV. Some treatment hubs lacked pharmacists who provide assistance and education in antiretroviral therapy dispensing, preparation, and delivery for children living with HIV.

HIV screening, peer counseling, and reproductive health services have been disrupted due to limitation in the transportations and operational hours of HIV healthcare facilities. Community-based HIV screening were stopped intermittently because of the threat of Covid-19 infection among volunteers, aggravated by the limitation in the availability personal protective equipment. The lack of preparation of care providers and the lack of internet and devices among care recipients were major issues in the effective shift and delivery of HIV-related services to online means. According to panelists, these situations resulted in the decrease of HIV screening among key populations, increase in pregnancy rates among mothers living with HIV, and decline in the rates of adherence to HIV care and treatment.

The pandemic magnified and widened existing socioeconomic challenges already being faced by PLHIV subgroups. Out-of-pocket spending increased for PLHIV subgroups to receive the care they needed. Reports of gender-based and domestic violence increased which could be associated with loss of economic opportunities and gains. Among transgender PLHIV, online sexual engagements escalated as an alternative way to meet the daily economic needs of life.



Figure 1. Key Strategies to Address the Multifaceted Needs of Various PLHIV Subgroups

Based on the discussion, **four main strategies** were highlighted to reach and help PLHIV subgroups **with their health-related needs** (Figure 1). Technological developments have been witnessed on how HIV services were carried out during the pandemic. The traditional face-to-face consultation, counseling, and psychosocial support were shifted to online platform and teleconsultation. HIV testing has been brought at the comfort of homes of HIV at-risk populations by sending HIV self-test kits. Several facilities, groups, and organizations advocated and collaborated for ART medications to be delivered at the doorsteps of PLHIV subgroups' homes. Programs and services were created to provide and intensify psychosocial support and socioeconomic assistance for those PLHIV subgroups and families of PLHIV who experienced socioeconomic challenges during the pandemic.

The discussion provided insight on **the critical value of collaboration between healthcare facilities, community-based organizations, and PLHIV subgroups**. Advocacy has been instrumental for the voices of PLHIV subgroups to be heard and their needs to be supported. Overall, discoveries and developments in HIV services during the pandemic can help define and refine the future of a more responsive, inclusive, and resilient HIV healthcare delivery system in the Philippines.

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