

8

Utilising an innovative Safe Space model to increase uptake of HIV testing services amongst adolescents in marginalised settings of Gauteng province, South Africa

Zibengwa E¹

¹HIVSA, Johannesburg, South Africa

Background: South Africa faces a growing burden of adolescents living with HIV. There is lack of integrated models that innovatively address adolescents' HIV care needs. The situation is more acute for female adolescents in poor communities who experience structural gender related restrictions that marginalise and close their spaces to enrol and participate in HIV programs. As result, over a third (38%) of new HIV infections in South Africa occur in adolescents and youth aged 15 – 24 years. Also, ART coverage and viral suppression is lowest amongst this age group with only 40% of those living with HIV being on ART and 48% of those on ART being virally suppressed.

Materials & Methods: HIVSA's Choma Cafés is a PEPFAR-funded DREAMS Innovation Challenge winner. A key objective of the project is to increase HIV identification and linkages to care for adolescents. Utilising shipping containers that are transformed into physical, social and digital safe spaces, adolescents received a core package of HIV education, HIV testing services (HTS) and Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) services. With on-site mentorship from older female mentors, and in circles of five or more friends, the adolescents underwent social, cognitive, health, economic and protective assets building activities. The activities include trainings in financial literacy, enterprise development, employability and linkages to internship and scholarships. At baseline (pre-intervention), we assessed the uptake of HTS for 16 686 most vulnerable sub-groups of female adolescents aged between 15 and 24 years who enrolled in the program at 30 sites located in poor districts with high HIV burden in Gauteng province in October 2015. A post-intervention assessment was done in December 2018.

Results: At baseline only 1168 (7%) of the 16 686 AGYW disclosed their HIV status. At endline assessment (post-intervention) 15 561 (93%) knew their HIV status as the model optimised HIV testing and disclosures. The 15 561 includes 105 new cases that were discovered to be HIV positive. All the 105 new positives were successfully linked to Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) and were supported through the program's tailored interventions.

Conclusions: Integrating Safe Spaces in adolescents programming is an effective mechanism that is proving to be a game changer in educating, inspiring, mobilizing and expanding adolescents interest to partake in HTS and SRH services. The Choma innovation Cafés have proven feasibility in cost-effectiveness, scalability, responsiveness and acceptability and can easily be evaluated to trace and measure impact. The model has since been further replicated at new sites; 10 in Kwa-Zulu Natal province and 34 in Gauteng province. Local community-based organizations view the model as a sustainable solution as it improves their capacity to strengthen and leverage adolescent and health interventions. Most importantly, the innovation Cafés have become hubs for optimizing care for adolescents living with HIV by creating systemic platforms and pathways for access to peer network, family disclosures, adherence support, case conferencing, bidirectional referrals and sexual risk reduction.