

Improving access to HIV testing through lay providers and self-testing in Vietnam

Bringing testing services closer to the communities that need them most

COMMUNITY-BASED HIV TESTING SERVICES

Lê Minh Thành is the leader of G-Link, a community-based organization and social enterprise serving men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women (TGW) in Ho Chi Minh City. Thành is also one of Vietnam's first lay providers offering HIV testing. In this role, Thành delivers HIV testing services directly to MSM and TGW clients using rapid HIV diagnostic tests—either a whole blood (fingerstick) test or an oral swab—which can be administered easily and quickly. When his clients receive a reactive result on the rapid test, Thành counsels and supports them to access confirmatory testing and—if confirmed as HIV positive—early treatment.

“My clients trust me because I’m from the community. I’m 100% engaged in their process of testing. I can support them all the way.” Lê Minh Thành, G-Link lay tester

FILLING GAPS IN HIV TESTING AMONG AT-RISK POPULATIONS

G-link's new HIV lay testing services are possible because of a recently introduced community-based HIV testing program, designed to fill gaps in testing among key populations at high risk of HIV in Vietnam. The community-friendly approach aims to bring testing services closer to those who need them most: MSM and TGW, female sex workers (FSW), and people who inject drugs (PWID) and their sex partners.

The pilot was launched by the PATH-led Healthy Markets initiative, funded by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The pilot is implemented in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Vietnam Ministry of Health.



Lay providers deliver HIV testing services using a rapid HIV diagnostic tests, including a whole-blood (fingerstick) test (pictured), which can be administered easily and quickly. Photo: PATH.

“Community-based testing is so convenient and friendly. I can be tested at any time, any place, and I feel very comfortable. The test is fast. I don’t have to wait long for the results.” MSM client of G-Link, Ho Chi Minh City

One of the key advantages of community HIV testing is that the providers conducting the tests are familiar with the people they are testing and the services are easily accessible and convenient for the clients. Since the program began in November 2015, 217 lay providers have been trained to offer quality rapid-testing services, including counseling. The approach is being rolled out in the urban centers of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, and also the rural provinces of Dien Bien and Nghe An.

ACCELERATING 90-90-90 THROUGH COMMUNITY HIV TESTING

There are an estimated 227,000 people living with HIV in Vietnam.¹ In 2013, approximately only one-third of key populations sought HIV testing and counseling and received their results, a slight decrease compared to 2011. Stigma and discrimination remain powerful barriers to testing uptake among key populations, along with the time and cost associated with seeking HIV testing at conventional testing facilities.²

Vietnam was the first country in Asia to adopt the global 90-90-90 targets towards ending the HIV epidemic.³ The Vietnam Administration for HIV/AIDS Control (VAAC) recognized the potential of community HIV testing models to rapidly increase HIV case detection towards achieving the first target, and this strategy has been officially integrated into the VAAC's action plan for 2016–2020.

Healthy Markets has played a key role in championing and supporting an accelerated pilot of lay provider and HIV self-testing services across priority provinces of Vietnam. The pilot follows the recent endorsement of lay testing in the WHO's 2015 consolidated guidelines on HIV testing services.⁴

“Lay providers who are trained can, using rapid diagnostic tests, independently conduct safe and effective HIV testing services.”

World Health Organization recommendation, 2015

A TAILORED APPROACH

The program is implemented in partnership with local health authorities and nongovernmental organizations serving key populations: The Center for Rural Community Research and Development, Life, and the Center for Community Health and Development.

Healthy Markets worked with key populations and health care workers to tailor lay and self-testing approaches to the diverse population needs across priority urban and rural settings:

1. FSWs, PWID, and their sex partners in the rural provinces of Dien Bien and Nghe An.
2. MSM and TGW in the urban centers of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

Lay providers are selected based on their access and reach to key populations. In Dien Bien and Nghe An, lay providers include village health workers and community workers connected to local health care stations. In Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, providers include representatives of community organizations serving MSM and TGW.

The selected lay providers attend intensive two-day trainings facilitated by Healthy Markets and the local partners. The trainings equip lay providers with sufficient skills and knowledge to deliver quality HIV lay testing using the Alere Determine™ HIV-1/2 Ab rapid diagnostic whole-blood test or the OraSure OraQuick ADVANCE® rapid HIV-1/2 antibody test (involving an oral swab), practicing the full procedure with both anatomic models and real people. Following the training, the lay providers are supplied with job aids and test kits for the immediate initiation of services. Healthy Markets and local partners regularly monitor and supervise the lay providers as they test clients in the community.



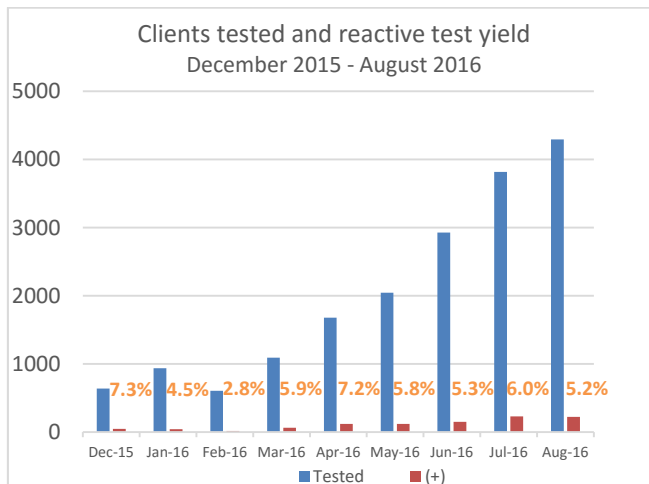
A village health worker counseling a client in his home before delivering HIV lay testing using the Alere Determine™ HIV-1/2 rapid diagnostic test. Photo: PATH.

HIV self-testing services were launched in May 2016, and are offered by MSM and TGW community organizations to clients. Clients now have the option to self-test using the Alere Determine™ HIV-1/2 rapid test or the OraQuick® HIV-1/2 rapid test, with support from a lay provider.

DETECTING NEW HIV CASES

The initial success of the program in both urban and rural areas is extremely encouraging. In the first nine months of service delivery, lay providers tested 17,901 key population clients at risk. The lay providers are particularly effective in reaching those who previously did not access regular testing. Preliminary data from the intervention evaluation found that up until June 2016, 65 percent of the clients accessing lay testing were new, and that 44 percent of those who had been tested at least once had not tested in more than a year.⁵

The lay providers are also effectively detecting new HIV cases. Between December 2015 and August 2016, 5.6 percent of all rapid tests delivered by lay providers were reactive (see figure below). Following a reactive test, individuals are supported by lay providers to access confirmatory testing. To date, 3 percent and 7 percent of clients received reactive tests in the rural and urban areas, respectively.⁶ This is against a background positivity rate of 1 percent detected at fixed HIV testing facilities.⁷



To date, 446 clients have completed HIV self-testing supported by lay providers at community organizations. 29 (almost 7 percent) have been confirmed as HIV positive.

“I like the convenience of self-testing and that it is completely confidential. I can know my status faster.”

MSM client in Ho Chi Minh City

LINKAGES TO CARE

From December 2015 until June 2016, the lay providers have supported 348 clients (96 percent of those tested within this period) confirmed as HIV positive to subsequently enroll in HIV care and treatment services. The peer support offered by lay providers is particularly important for these clients:

“It’s certainly difficult when a client’s test is reactive. Everyone responds differently. But no matter what, I am there for them. I listen to their concerns and they are free to express themselves. I help them to access confirmation testing. If a client is confirmed as HIV positive, I support them to enroll in early treatment.”

Lê Minh Thành, G-Link lay tester

ENSURING QUALITY

Lay providers deliver services under the supportive supervision of district health authorities. Service delivery is evaluated according to minimum standards related to pre-test and post-test counseling, performing the test, reading the results, and medical waste management. In 2016, lay providers met minimum quality standards 96.8, 81.5, and 90.6 percent of the time in Ho Chi Minh City, Dien Bien, and Nghe An, respectively. There was 100 percent concordance between the lay providers’ reading of the rapid diagnostic test results when compared to expert reads.

PROMOTING SERVICES

A key component of introducing HIV lay provider testing to Vietnam involved raising awareness of the new service to the community, particularly among hard-to-reach key populations. Healthy Markets worked with local community organizations, television networks, and media agencies to roll out campaigns that specifically targeted key populations, promoting the benefits of the services across a variety of platforms, including community events, television features, prominent billboards, and mobile applications.

The services have also been heavily promoted on the Xóm Cầu Vồng (Rainbow Village) Facebook page, a much needed open space for MSM and TGW in Vietnam to connect and exchange information on HIV prevention, testing, and care, launched by Healthy Markets and community partners in 2015.



Promoting Ho Chi Minh City-based lay testing services to the 137,000+ followers of the Xóm Cầu Vồng Facebook page. Photo: PATH.

KEY BENEFITS

The phenomenal response to lay and HIV self-testing indicates that this approach is meeting a need among key populations in Vietnam who may have not accessed conventional HIV testing services previously. Clients feel particularly comfortable and assured by the discreet and confidential nature of the services, the convenience of being tested at a time and place of their choosing, the quality of testing, quick access to results, and friendly and sympathetic counseling from a peer throughout the entire process.

“Our clients know and trust us and the procedure is simple and convenient. One of the aspects our clients value most is that they don’t need to travel to get tested like before.” Lang Thị Nhất, a village health worker in Nghe

An province

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES MOVING FORWARD

One of the key challenges encountered implementing the lay HIV testing model is that clients with reactive tests can experience a long wait for confirmatory testing due to drawn out administrative procedures. PATH and local partners are collaborating with authorities to shorten the wait times.

LESSONS LEARNED

HIV lay provider testing is a feasible and effective approach to increase rates of regular testing among key populations at risk, particularly those who have never accessed testing at a health facility. The model also has great potential for sustainability and expansion, as explained by a lay provider serving MSM in Ho Chi Minh City:

“The program is responding to the real needs of a community that has been waiting for this a long time. We see there is great potential for fee-based services to sustain our work in the future.” Nguyễn Công Hậu, G3VN lay

tester

An evaluation of the lay provider HIV testing through the Healthy Markets community-based testing program will inform the development of national guidelines and the expansion of services to other HIV-affected provinces of Vietnam. Furthermore, experience gained from implementing the model can be adapted to support the roll out of additional services that would benefit key populations that are at substantial risk of HIV, such as pre-exposure prophylaxis.

Learn more: For more information about HIV lay provider and self-testing in Vietnam, contact the Healthy Markets team at HM@path.org.

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