**Activity Description**

Safe Zindagi has a team of 12 virtual counsellors (vCs) to reach potential clients through various channels such as: online dating platforms (Grindr, Tinder, Blued, and Planet Romeo), social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook), paid ads on Google display network, and an online network on WhatsApp (WA). They also collaborate with community-based organizations that work with an online community to reach at-risk individuals.

- The vCs establish initial communication with clients online and then transition to WA to build rapport and ensure confidentiality. They also provide pre-test counselling and sexual health counselling.
- The vCs assist clients in booking an HIV test through the SZ virtual platform. Clients have the option to choose the nearest testing center, including private laboratories with subsidized paid services (private labs), NGO-based labs, ICTCs (government testing centers), or home testing.
- Clients must be at least 18 years old and complete a risk assessment and consent process before booking a test. The vCs follow up with clients to ensure the testing process is completed, and they provide post-test counselling.
- If a client tests positive, the vCs assist with confirmatory testing at the ICTC and facilitate linkage to the ARTC for appropriate treatment. Negative high-risk clients are also counselled and linked to prevention services such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

**Safe Zindagi approaches to client engagement:**

- **Virtual to Virtual (HIV Self-Testing):** This approach involves clients who are reached virtually and seek services virtually without visiting any physical site.
- **Virtual to Physical (HIV Testing and PrEP):** These clients are guided by a virtual counsellor to book a test on Safe Zindagi and then visit a facility-based testing site.
- **Physical to Virtual (Lab Testing Result):** Clients are reached through physical outreach by CBO/NGO and then register on the SZ online platform for online services.

**Evidence**

- **Virtual testing through physical testing sites:** From October 2019 to March 2023, 31,670 clients either booked an appointment or ordered self-testing kits.
- **Self-test Kit:** Of these, 16,741 users completed HIV screening through the Safe Zindagi platform.
- **Confirmatory Test:** 795 people were newly diagnosed positive through the platform, and 85% of them started life-saving antiretroviral therapy.
- **Amongst negative, more than 1,200 were initiated on PrEP and ~50% was retained on PrEP over 3 years.

**Facilitators**

- The virtual platform was made possible with the support of the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the guidance of the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) and State AIDS Control Societies.
- Safe Zindagi is implemented by the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine along with the prime implementing partner, YR Gaitonde Center for AIDS Research and Education (YRG CARE).
- The virtual operations are executed through a team of well-trained virtual counsellors.
- The website SafeZindagi.in is user-friendly and easy to navigate.
- The program has also created and leveraged a network of private practitioners and laboratories for PrEP referrals.
- Collaborations with manufacturing and pharmaceutical companies to leverage donations and subsidies on diagnostics and medications.
- Communications feedback to develop educational materials and marketing plans.

**Challenges**

- It is not always possible to ensure that clients who visit or register on Safe Zindagi platform avail the services. This creates a gap between client visits, registration and service provided.
- In some cases the virtual counsellors (vCs) experience difficulties following up with clients and make sure they are adherent to PrEP.
- Clients who receive HIV self-testing kits online do not always upload the test results on the online platform. This affects the numbers of test kits dispensed versus results received.

**Lessons Learned**

- The experience emphasizes the benefits of using virtual counsellors to reach out to individuals in dating apps and online spaces, and how a user-friendly platform with integrated service delivery can effectively reach a high-risk population that has largely been missed by traditional HIV programs.
- Integration of HIV self-testing, PrEP, PEP, and telemedicine into these platforms has played a crucial role in advancing progress towards achieving the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets.