



MITR CLINICS: NON-HIV ENTRY POINTS TO DELIVER HIV SERVICES TO TRANSGENDER PEOPLE in India

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Context

- The 2011 census recorded approximately 0.48 million transgender individuals in India. The transgender community in India is disproportionately affected by HIV, with a prevalence rate of 3.78% compared to 0.22% in the general population
- In 2020, ACCELERATE, with technical assistance from The Fenway Institute (TFI), conducted national and state-level community consultations to address disparities and enhance accessibility of service points. This helped to understand service delivery gaps and barriers faced by the transgender community in accessing health services
- Based on these discussions, it emerged that community-led comprehensive service delivery sites for transgender populations were an unmet need
- Evidence-based programming and implementation design guided by community consultations, led to the establishment of the first “Mitr” clinic in Hyderabad on January, 2021. “Mitr” is the Hindi word for friend. Subsequently, two additional Mitr clinics were also established in Maharashtra

Activity Description

- The *Mitr* clinics in Hyderabad, Thane, and Pune are run predominantly by personnel from the transgender community
- Our approach is a comprehensive and integrative model, and we prioritize community’s preferences by providing non-HIV services that act as an entry point for delivering HIV services
- The clinics provide a comprehensive range of services, including gender-affirming care (via referrals), mental health services and counselling, laser hair removal (client-funded), HIV/STI prevention and treatment, and access to government social and welfare programs
- HIV testing services are offered for free, while non-HIV services like laser therapy and hormone replacement therapy are referred and available at subsidized rates.
- Since November 2022, and thanks to the donations from John C. Martin Foundation, the clinics offer free PrEP to the clients

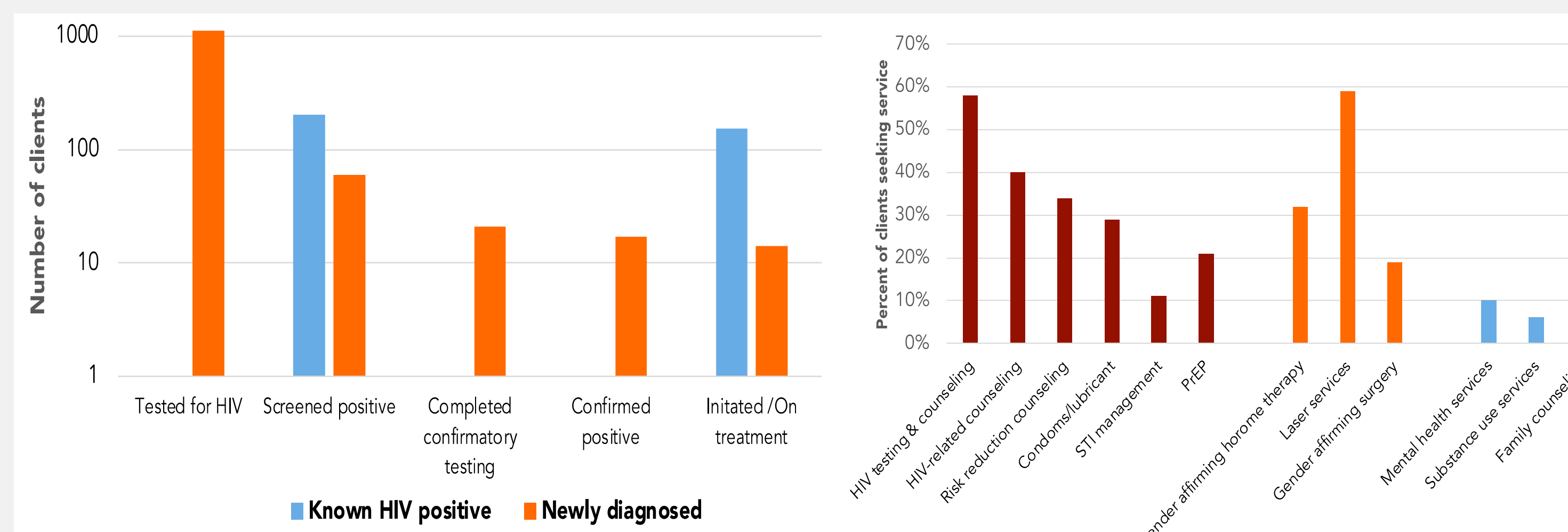


Activity Impact

- The clinics identify and connect unreached populations to health services, including HIV and transgender-specific non-HIV services, in both government-supported targeted interventions (TI) and non-TI settings
- The impact of the *Mitr* clinics has been disseminated through several public health platforms including the Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections (CROI) 2023, International AIDS Society (IAS) 2023, Nature Medicine (2022), or the National White Paper on Comprehensive Services for Transgender People (2022)
- The *Mitr* model was also studied by the All India Institute of Medical Science to develop the National Center of Excellence (CoE) for transgender individuals in Delhi
- A helpdesk was established at the District Hospital in Telangana (Karimnagar) to navigate transgender clients to relevant services (HIV/STI testing and treatment) at the government hospital, and nearby private clinics and Mitr clinic, Hyderabad for non-HIV services, which are not available at the government hospital. This model was virtually inaugurated on October 15, 2022, by Shri. Alok Saxena, the then Additional Secretary and Director General, NACO

Evidence

- Between February 2021 and March 2023, the *Mitr* clinics registered over 4,000 clients, with an HIV burden of 7%
- Out of the total registered clients, 2,007 individuals (78%) reported that they had never been registered in any government or civil society HIV intervention before
- The data below captures the achievements from March 2021 to December 2022



Facilitators

- The *Mitr* clinics were made possible with the support of PEPFAR/USAID and guidance from NACO and the State AIDS Control Societies of Telangana and Maharashtra.
- The implementation of the *Mitr* clinics is carried out by the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine through ACCELERATE, in collaboration with the prime implementing partner, YR Gaitonde Center for AIDS Research and Education (YRGCARE)
- The service charter was created through community consultations at national and state levels, involving the transgender community and with technical assistance from by The Fenway Institute (TFI) in Boston
- The *Mitr* clinics partner with Indian government departments and ministries, including the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, to enhance skills, capacity, and integrated transgender health programs within the National Health Mission
- The team members of the *Mitr* clinics actively participate in NACO working groups and technical resource groups (TRG). They advocate for and implement comprehensive and integrated service delivery for the transgender community, ensuring their needs are addressed effectively

Challenges

- Non-disclosure of HIV status by clients
- Difficulty reaching clients, and clients being hesitant to share their address due to fear of their Guru discovering their HIV status
- Clients unwilling to seek counselling for HIV testing and access to ART



Lessons Learned

- Integrating non-HIV services desired by the community enabled *Mitr* clinics to reach clients who were not previously engaged in local/national HIV programming and served as an entry point to HIV testing and treatment
- Data support the need to transition from disease-centric to person-centric care to achieve HIV/AIDS epidemic control
- Overall, clients have reported high satisfaction levels with the services offered. The community-led, stigma-free and friendly environment was the main reason for clients’ satisfaction
- Laser therapy was the most preferred service along with other non-HIV services (hormone replacement therapy, social protection), and served as entry points to HIV testing and care. HIV self-testing kits are available at the clinics and are preferred by the community due to confidentiality