

Online Change Agents

A new peer-outreach model advancing lifesaving behavior change over social media

REACHING AT-RISK POPULATIONS ONLINE

In a quiet corner of bustling downtown Ho Chi Minh City—the largest urban center in Vietnam—Thủ starts his working day by logging in on Facebook. His inbox is filled with messages from young urban men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women (TGW) seeking advice on a broad range of issues. Some are seeking guidance on safe sex and HIV protection. Others are interested in support to access HIV testing services, especially if they are unsure where to go or scared of being judged. These are real and significant concerns for the MSM and TGW community in Ho Chi Minh City, among which HIV prevalence is estimated to be as high as 16 percent.¹

No matter what question or concern is raised, Thủ is trained and equipped to respond to every single message and provide ongoing follow-up and support to each sender. He can even meet with his “clients” offline to assist them in accessing HIV testing services. This is because Thủ is one of several “Online Change Agents” (OCAs) at the core of a new, innovative HIV peer-outreach model 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).

“Empathy and understanding is the key to the success of the model. As a peer, I understand the particular language and special needs of my clients. The HIV counseling becomes more meaningful because we can relate to each other. There are no barriers.”

Thủ Nguyễn Tấn, OCA

A NEW AGE OF PEER OUTREACH

In 2015, Healthy Markets established a Facebook page called Xóm Cầu Vồng (Rainbow Village) as a new and much needed open space for MSM and TGW in Vietnam to connect and exchange information on HIV prevention and care. The success of the page has been phenomenal, growing to over 137,000 followers by September 2016.



Đoàn Thanh Tùng, an Online Change Agent reaching populations at risk of HIV via social media. Photo: PATH.

OCAs are now connecting directly with Xóm Cầu Vồng followers to advance lifesaving behavior change offline. The model represents a new age of peer outreach, where the ability to reach and support clients is unrestricted by time or geography.

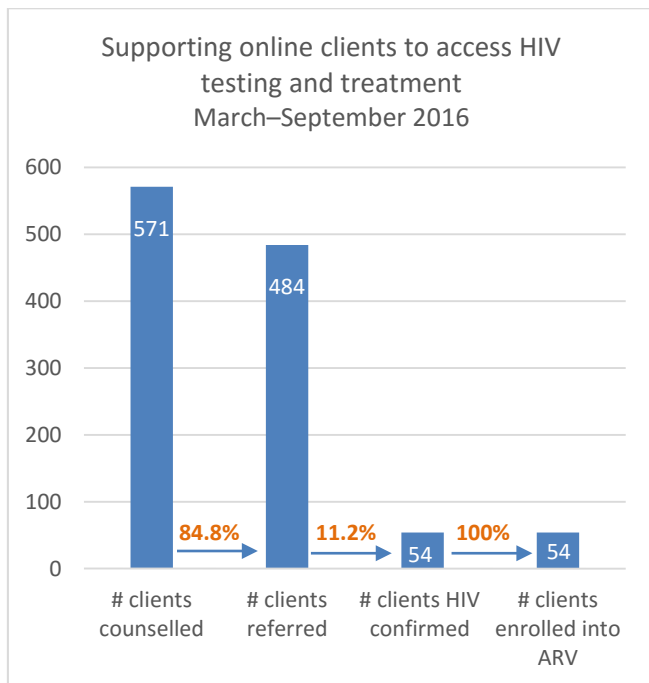
“Social media is an obvious and powerful tool to connect with MSM and TGW, especially those ‘hidden’ or hard to reach. There are no time or distance barriers. MSM and TGW are comfortable in this space. It’s a huge part of their everyday life and this is where they feel free to be themselves. Some MSM and TGW can only be approached on social media, so that is where we need to be for them.”

Thủ Nguyễn Tấn, OCA

PROMISING BEGINNINGS

The OCA model was launched in March 2016. The agents are already having an impressive impact, having counseled more than 571 clients—of which 84.8 percent were successfully referred to HIV testing services (see figure below). Of the referred clients, 11.2 percent were found to be HIV positive and were supported by the OCAs to enroll in antiretroviral treatment. The support from OCAs during the testing process is highly valued by clients.

“I felt panicked and collapsed when I received the positive result. If I didn’t have [the OCA] there to encourage and console me, and help me to enroll in treatment, then perhaps I wouldn’t be alive and hopeful today.” K.A., an MSM client in Ho Chi Minh City



The OCAs have recently received additional training to deliver HIV testing services direct to their online clients, as part of a newly introduced community-based testing pilot. The agents organize offline appointments at a time and location convenient for the client. At the appointment, the agent can easily and quickly administer a rapid HIV whole-blood (fingerstick) diagnostic test. If a client receives a reactive result on the rapid test, the agents can counsel and support them to access confirmatory testing and—if confirmed as HIV positive—early treatment.

“Many MSM and TGW are busy studying or working during the day, and it’s more convenient to be tested outside of office hours. Offering a flexible and fast service, where a connection and counseling has already taken place online, is really convenient and comfortable for them. Being able to follow clients through the process ensures that no one is lost along the way.” Thủ Nguyễn Tấn, OCA

By connecting online MSM and TGW with offline HIV testing services, OCAs are playing a crucial role in the national HIV response, particularly in reaching at-risk populations that may otherwise be missed. Through in-depth counseling, the agents can provide follow-up and ongoing support to the client in planning and fulfilling life-affirming behavior change for HIV prevention.

Learn more: For more information about Online Change Agents, contact the Healthy Markets team at HM@path.org.

Reference

1. National Committee for Prevention and Control of AIDS, Drugs and Prostitution (NCADP). *Viet Nam AIDS Response Progress Report, 2014*. Hanoi, Vietnam: NCADP; 2014.



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