



A staff member and beneficiary of the Step Up Project pose outside an outreach vehicle. Beneficiaries help shape the project by participating in community advisory groups, guided by the principle, 'nothing about us, without us'.

Stepping Up Care

Enhancing the comprehensiveness of harm reduction services, capacity and policy for people who use drugs in South Africa



"I know when there weren't needles around...It was so scary to me. You would see three people on one needle. I don't see that anymore! And that is a relief."

32 year old, male Step Up Project beneficiary, Cape Town.

TB HIV Care launched the Step Up Project in 2015 to address the risks faced by people who use drugs, including people who inject drugs (PWID). Step Up provides harm reduction services, including needle and syringe distribution, opioid substitution therapy (OST), psychosocial services and community empowerment to the PWID community as per the World Health Organization's recommended package of HIV, STI, TB and viral hepatitis services for PWID. The project operates in Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth.

People who inject drugs (PWID) in South Africa are criminalised and experience stigma and discrimination from the general public, health providers and law enforcement. PWID are also particularly vulnerable to blood-borne diseases like HIV and hepatitis C (HCV) with HIV prevalence estimated at 21% and HCV at 45%.

TB HIV Care receives funding through Mainline as an Alliance partner of Bridging the Gaps to procure sterile injecting equipment, support harm reduction training, deliver OST and psychosocial services and advance the human rights of PWID.

The Step Up Project has had significant impact. Following the principle of 'nothing about us, without us', the project has ensured that PWID have been included and represented in national policy processes that affect them, including the National Health Sector Drug Master Plan, the National Hepatitis Action Plan and the National HIV PWID Plan. Other successes include halving the sharing of injecting equipment in Cape Town from 37% in 2013 to 15% in 2017, reaching a point where 81% of people who use drugs in the city reported using a new needle the last time they injected. Research has shown statistically significant reductions in the use of heroin and increased health outcomes for people on OST. Project evaluations have also shown how the project has fostered a renewed sense of personhood and right to exist in the world among service users. Unfortunately, the Durban municipality halted the needle and syringe service in that city in mid 2018. As a result, the Step Up Project has intensified efforts to enhance stakeholder engagement and support for harm reduction services.

Context

- South Africa has an adult (15 – 49 years) HIV prevalence of 21%, with 61% viral suppression among people living with HIV on antiretroviral therapy.
- There are an estimated 67,000 - 75,000 PWID in South Africa (approximately 1 500 in Cape Town, 1 000 in Durban and 500 in Port Elizabeth).
- Heroin is most commonly injected, followed by methamphetamine.
- PWID are particularly vulnerable to HIV and HCV with HIV prevalence estimated at 21% and HCV at 45%.



Members of the Cape Town Network of People who Use Drugs (CANPUD) (one of several networks of people who use drugs set up and supported by the Step Up Project to advocate for the rights of PWUD) help create safer public spaces by clearing areas of inappropriately disposed injecting equipment.

Recommendations

- Harm reduction services are effective in South Africa and should be expanded.
- For HIV and HCV epidemic control, the number of needles distributed in the cities where TB HIV Care operates needs to double and OST coverage increase at least five fold.
- Best practices from TB HIV Care's OST projects should be translated into guidelines and the cost of methadone reduced to enhance outcomes and increase coverage.
- Advocacy, engagement and partnership needs to continue to ensure that the commitments made to increase access to HIV and hepatitis services for PWID in the National Strategic Plan on HIV, TB and STIs and the National Hepatitis Action Plan are realised.
- Community-based harm reduction strategic information should be shared in a range of media, through the South African Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use, at scientific conferences and through academic publications.
- The needle and syringe service in Durban should be reinstated urgently in a way that increases sustainability in the future.
- Harm reduction services addressing the needs of women who use drugs, youth and for people who use stimulants are areas for future focus.



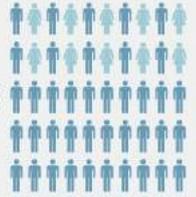
Results

OVER THREE YEARS, IN THREE URBAN AREAS

>5000

PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS

PROVIDED WITH CONTINUOUS SUPPLY OF STERILE INJECTING EQUIPMENT



1 million

HARM REDUCTION PACKS DISTRIBUTED

>300 MONTHLY

PWID TESTED FOR HIV



>100

PEOPLE INITIATED ON METHADONE

FOR 6-18 MONTHS



HEROIN USE

While on opioid substitution programme



HEALTH OUTCOMES

- ★ Social integration
- ★ Personal hygiene
- ★ Linkage to ART
- ★ Linkage to HCV treatment



A service beneficiary disposing of a used needle and syringe safely in a portable sharps container supplied by the Step Up Project.