

OPTIONS HIV Prevention Ambassador Training

Oral PrEP uptake increased more than 30% among adolescent girls and young women in a Zimbabwe district following OPTIONS training to enhance AGYW peer ambassador knowledge and skills

Mazowe Ambassador Training Field Test – Final Report

PROBLEM

Lack of accurate and adequate information about oral PrEP, coupled with challenges to accessing PrEP and other sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention services, make it difficult for adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) to protect themselves from HIV. Major challenges to oral PrEP uptake and continuation identified by young women in Zimbabwe include: prevailing conservative beliefs that discourage sexual health services for adolescents and young people, lack of knowledge about how to manage side effects, myths and misconceptions about HIV prevention options, incomplete information about access to HIV prevention options including oral PrEP and HIV transmission, and inability to meet the costs associated with accessing health services.

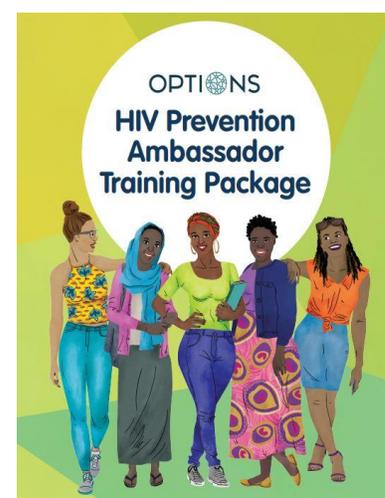
In August 2016, as oral PrEP delivery started in Zimbabwe, Pangaea Zimbabwe AIDS Trust (PZAT, the local OPTIONS partner) began recruiting and working with AGYW PrEP ambassadors to build awareness on oral PrEP within communities in Mazowe District. Mazowe is a district of about 230,000 residents just north of Harare, characterized by small-scale mining and subsistence farming. From October 2017 onward, PZAT has collaborated with the International Training and Education Centre for Health (I-TECH), FHI 360, and other DREAMS partners to support PrEP ambassadors in Mazowe. These ambassadors carry out health education activities within their communities and provide support and referrals to adolescent girls and young women seeking HIV prevention services, including oral PrEP referrals for DREAMS participants. Additional plans are underway to engage these ambassadors in the community-level distribution of oral PrEP and HIV self-test kits.

In the course of their work within Mazowe, PZAT and partners observed low uptake of oral PrEP among adolescent girls and young women in the district, along with ongoing continuation challenges for those AGYW who were using PrEP. PZAT, I-TECH, and FHI 360 DREAMS sought to more actively engage the Mazowe ambassadors in oral PrEP education in order to build more widespread awareness and demand for this HIV prevention option. In collaboration with other OPTIONS partners, the PZAT team determined that comprehensive, youth-friendly education modules containing detailed information on oral PrEP as part of the HIV prevention package were needed to build the capacity of AGYW to participate in oral PrEP programming, demand creation, and awareness raising, and to in turn improve oral PrEP uptake and continuation among their peers.

SOLUTION

The OPTIONS HIV Prevention Ambassador Training Package

OPTIONS partners worked together to develop a training package to meet this need. The package uses an interactive, youth-friendly format to present in-depth information on oral PrEP and skills building in the areas of advocacy and peer support. It also includes a booklet of peer education and advocacy tools that trained ambassadors can use in their communities and with their peers as they carry out their work. In addition to oral PrEP-specific information, the OPTIONS training includes foundational knowledge in sexual and reproductive health, HIV transmission and prevention basics, as well as the complex relationships between gender dynamics, violence, and HIV vulnerability.



Training Package cover

The OPTIONS HIV Prevention Ambassador Training (linked [here](#)) builds the capacity of AGYW ambassadors so that they are able to competently and actively participate in planning and implementation of peer support programming, advocacy for oral PrEP access, demand creation activities, and community awareness raising. The training package leads ambassadors through a process of examining their communities and identifying the socio-cultural and behavioral barriers that adolescent girls and young women face to preventing HIV. Once they identify the key issues, ambassadors set goals to contribute to HIV prevention in their communities and are guided to create action plans to accomplish these goals. Ambassador goals and action plans are informed by the resources and support networks available to them and build on their individual strengths and interests. Participants in the training utilize role plays and other activities to ensure that they are prepared to carry out their action plans.

Target audience

The OPTIONS HIV Prevention Ambassador Training is tailored to reach peer HIV prevention ambassadors, who are typically adolescent girls and young women between the ages of 15-24. The training is primarily intended to help AGYW remain HIV negative, but many of the skills introduced and reinforced through the training could be used by ambassadors to support healthy behavior and decision-making by all AGYW, including those who are HIV-positive.



Training package prototype review, Harare, April 2019

AGYW engagement in package development

Using a human-centered design approach, adolescent girls and young women were meaningfully involved in the ideation, creation, and implementation of the training package. During the initial phase of development, AGYW provided guidance on the content, length, and format of the training through group discussions in Zimbabwe and Kenya. For example, AGYW stated a need for additional, detailed information about HIV transmission, skills to respond to reports of gender-based violence from their peers, and practice with answering tough questions about PrEP from parents and other community members. In addition, they requested that the training be highly participatory and that the package include a toolkit of resources for ambassadors to use in their work.

In addition to group consultations, three young women – representing Uganda, Zimbabwe, and South Africa – provided guidance on the activities, content, and layout of the training package during an in-person workshop conducted in Harare to fine-tune the training. Input from adolescent girls and young women ensured that all training activities are youth-friendly and engage participants to interact with and interpret information, applying it to the lives of their peers and their work in communities.

USAID and PEPFAR team involvement

During the development process, the OPTIONS team sought to ensure that the training package was relevant to DREAMS programming by meeting regularly with representatives from PEPFAR, USAID, OHA, and OGAC to gather input on the package contents and approach. Through ongoing discussions, including regular monthly calls and ad hoc meetings, feedback from these groups was incorporated into the final product. All feedback received from USAID/PEPFAR team involvement was incorporated into the guidance gained from OPTIONS country partners and AGYW, as mentioned above.

Field testing

In the final week of July 2019, PZAT, with support from I-TECH and FHI 360 DREAMS, field tested this evidence-informed OPTIONS HIV Prevention Ambassador Training Package with all 17 ambassadors operating within the district, some of whom are also DREAMS Champions.

Prior to the OPTIONS training, the Mazowe ambassadors had received training on HIV transmission and prevention methods, including basic information on oral PrEP. However, the OPTIONS training provided more comprehensive information on oral PrEP as part of combination prevention and focused on improving peer navigation, action planning, and advocacy skills. For example, during the training, ambassadors identified the main barriers to oral PrEP uptake in Mazowe and strategized a plan to address these barriers as a team.



Ambassadors enjoy training activities, Mazowe, July 2019

As individuals with established relationships within their communities and existing routines involving group health literacy sessions and ongoing one-on-one peer support, the Mazowe ambassadors were well placed to utilize additional oral PrEP information and skills in their work. After completing their OPTIONS training, ambassadors began applying their new knowledge and skills within Mazowe, working to implement the action plans they developed as part of the training. Their plans included conducting PrEP literacy sessions with community members, providing one-on-one support to AGYW, and informing programmers about barriers to oral PrEP uptake and continuation identified in the course of their work. During the first five months after the training (Aug-Dec 2019), the PZAT team observed an increase of more than 30% in oral PrEP uptake among adolescent girls and young women in Mazowe as compared to uptake in the prior seven months (Jan-Jul 2019).

IMPACT

As the only oral PrEP provider within Mazowe, PZAT collects monthly data on uptake of oral PrEP among adolescent girls and young women at all facilities providing oral PrEP within the district. These data were collected on an ongoing basis prior to and after the OPTIONS HIV Prevention Ambassador Training was conducted with the Mazowe ambassadors. As reported by PZAT, there was an average of 34 new initiations of oral PrEP by AGYW per month from January to July 2019 at the 7 Mazowe facilities providing oral PrEP. After the Ambassador training, average monthly oral PrEP initiations by AGYW from August to December 2019 increased to approximately 45 per month at these facilities, reflecting a 35% increase in oral PrEP uptake among adolescent girls and young women.

In September 2019, 10 additional facilities in Mazowe began providing oral PrEP with support from PZAT as part of Zimbabwe's national PrEP rollout strategy. The Mazowe ambassadors played a key role in PrEP rollout in these facilities, spreading awareness about the available services and spearheading the first PrEP referrals to new locations. From August to December 2019, an average of 52 total new AGYW initiated oral PrEP each month across all of the 17 Mazowe clinics.

In addition to collection of PrEP uptake data, the PZAT team collected pre- and post-test information from the ambassadors to determine whether the training increased their knowledge about oral PrEP. Results of these tests revealed that the training had a positive impact on PrEP knowledge. Ambassador test scores increased approximately 39% after the training.

The ambassadors were interviewed at 6 weeks and 4 months after the training. During the initial interviews, all ambassadors reported that the knowledge they gained helped to increase the number of adolescent girls and young women they were able to reach and refer for oral PrEP initiation. Six weeks after the training, the ambassadors reported referring 123 AGYW – including 46 DREAMS participants – for oral PrEP, representing more than 20 new referrals per week. Ambassadors expressed: feeling more equipped with detailed information about HIV and PrEP, experiencing increased confidence in speaking about oral PrEP, and successfully utilizing both the Shona and English Ambassador Toolkits to increase their credibility and standing in the community. As one ambassador noted:

“Sometimes during literacy sessions, clients would think I am sharing my own opinion or what I think about PrEP, but I would then refer them to the facts in the book, and that would help them understand and believe what I would have taught them.”

In addition, all ambassadors who received the training reported assisting AGYW with PrEP adherence through regular phone calls and home visits. Two ambassadors recounted using their new, in-depth oral PrEP knowledge to support four AGYW to reinstate PrEP after they had stopped taking the medication due to side effects. Another ambassador used her increased knowledge to support her peer to seek STI screening and treatment as well as reinstate oral PrEP.

Four months after the training, the Mazowe ambassadors reported continued use of the knowledge and skills gained from training, as well as their toolkits. Many reviewed the information in their toolkits prior to going out into the community and reported feeling confident enough to answer questions that they had previously referred to nurses. In addition, several ambassadors reported sharing their toolkits with peers to support their learning.

“When I give them the book and fliers to read, they actually come back to me and [together we go to] get PrEP.”

Ambassadors reported that one of their most commonly used tools was the “Care Response: Disclosures of Violence” worksheet. One ambassador described supporting access to oral PrEP for a young woman who preferred to keep her PrEP use private from her polygamous husband.

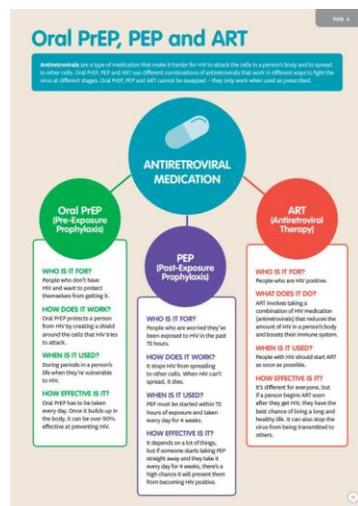
“For example, I helped this girl who is from the apostolic sect and now she is on PrEP and the husband and other wives will never know.”

Other tools most commonly used by ambassadors at the four-month point included those that differentiate PrEP, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) and anti-retroviral therapy (ART); dispel myths about HIV; and provide tips for consistently using oral PrEP. Using these and other tools from the training,



Sample role play from the Ambassador Toolkit

ambassadors have been able to explain complicated concepts, which has helped them gain access to new community groups, including religious sects and sex worker groups who previously did not engage with the ambassadors.



The PrEP, PEP, ART Ambassador Tool

The OPTIONS HIV Prevention Ambassador Training has built the capacity of Mazowe ambassadors to share accurate and complete information about oral PrEP with their peers and increased their confidence to work with oral PrEP providers. In fact, ambassadors noted that they are now seen by community members as the “go-to professionals” for information on HIV prevention. In addition, promoting the skills and legitimacy of ambassadors has enabled them to better support their peers, their communities and key stakeholders to reduce the barriers that AGYW face when attempting to access oral PrEP and other sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention services. Overall, oral PrEP uptake has increased among this population in the time period following implementation of the OPTIONS training, including in facilities new to PrEP provision, which were supported by the awareness-raising of ambassadors. As an added future benefit, the OPTIONS training will also serve to prepare these ambassadors for upcoming trainings on HIV self-testing and male partner engagement, all of which supports a truly comprehensive HIV prevention package for the Mazowe community.

MONITORING AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCALE UP

The training in Mazowe served as the field test for the OPTIONS HIV Prevention Ambassador Training. Since this training was first conducted, additional ambassadors have been trained in Chitungwiza – another district in Zimbabwe – and in three provinces in South Africa and one county in Kenya. In the coming months, additional trainings will be carried out by OPTIONS partners, including in Kenya and Uganda.

Chitungwiza ambassadors, since training, have been active in developing oral PrEP demand creation campaigns in coordination with national efforts to increase AGYW PrEP uptake. These young people have supported clinic-level mobilization and awareness raising in the community regarding the acceptability of oral PrEP for AGYW. Preliminary reports from the Chitungwiza clinic also indicate an increased uptake of oral PrEP by adolescent girls and young women since the training.

While no major issues were identified during the field test or subsequent trainings, a few key factors should be considered when planning to conduct the training. The individuals selected to facilitate the training should have experience with conducting interactive trainings, and ideally have experience in working with youth in a collaborative way. In addition, those selected to participate in the training should be of a relatively similar age and gender group (i.e. all female between the age of 15-20). If individuals older than 25, or men, will participate in the training, it is recommended that they be trained in their own sessions in order to best facilitate an atmosphere of safety and participation for adolescent girls and young women. For groups where individuals of a broad age range already have a collaborative and supportive relationship built on trust, it is possible to conduct their training together.

LOGISTICS, COSTS, AND MANAGEMENT

From the outset, the OPTIONS HIV Prevention Ambassador Training was designed to reduce costs to implementing organizations. The main costs to implement the training include a venue for training, printing of a single manual for the facilitator and a toolkit for each participant, minimal training supplies such as flipchart paper, refreshments during the training, and transport or accommodation for participants as relevant. The training does not require AV equipment or internet access beyond downloading the training package, and modules can be selected as needed to develop a shorter or longer training as desired.

Continued scale up of the training will require minimal resources and can be carried out by any interested group who is able to organize the printing of manuals and coordination of a multi-day informal training as described above. The ambassador toolkits are publicly available in Shona and Kiswahili and can be translated into other languages if there is interest. For organizations who are interested and able to collaborate, translations in other languages can be accommodated as well.



Having fun testing the boundary setting activity during the prototype review, Harare, April 2019

Finally, organizations or groups planning to implement an ambassador program – or who would like to supplement their existing ambassador training with all or selected portions of the OPTIONS manual – should have a plan in place to provide ongoing support to ambassadors once they are trained. Ongoing support is not necessarily financial or comprehensive but should be sufficient to address ambassador concerns and assist them when challenges arise. Organizations and projects already facilitating ambassador activities should not see a large change in costs related to ambassador support post training.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Point of contact

Kristine Torjesen, OPTIONS Project Director, ktorjesen@fhi360.org

Authors and email:

- Definate Nhamo, dnhamo@pzat.org
- Naledi Katsande, nkatsande@pzat.org
- Takudzwa Mamvuto, tmamvuto@pzat.org
- Morgan Garcia, mgarcia@fhi360.org
- Michele Lanham, mlanham@fhi360.org
- Giuliana Morales, gmorales@fhi360.org

The OPTIONS HIV Prevention Ambassador Training Package can be downloaded here:
<http://www.prepwatch.org/ambassador-training-package>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This program is made possible by the generous assistance from the American people through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Financial assistance was provided by USAID to FHI 360, Wits RHI, and AVAC under the terms of Cooperative Agreement No. AID-OAA-A-15-00035. The contents do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.