



Launching Index Case Screening in Gabon Military Health Facilities



TECHNICAL BRIEF
December 2022

Executive Summary

Gabon is committed to supporting and improving policies, systems, practices, and care for people living with HIV (PLHIV). With ambitious targets set by UNAIDS as their guide, Gabon's military health facilities launched their country's first index case screening approach to increase the number of PLHIV who know their HIV status.

MCD Global Health (MCD), in collaboration with the Military HIV/AIDS Program (PMLS, by its French acronym) and the Ministry of Health (MOH) National Program for the Control of Sexually Transmitted Infections (PNLIST, by its French acronym), developed a training manual, hosted a training, and established a system of ongoing outreach, training, and supportive supervision (OTSS) in order to support implementation. Now, with this effort initiated through the U.S. Department of Defense HIV/AIDS Prevention Program (DHAPP), military health facilities use the index case screening approach to reach close contacts of PLHIV, making the Military HIV/AIDS Program a pioneer in this strategic approach at the national level in Gabon.

Background

In December 2020, UNAIDS set new, ambitious targets for the 2021–2026 global HIV/AIDS strategy. These new targets call for 95% of all people living with HIV to know their status, 95% of all people who know their status receive treatment, and 95% of people with HIV who are receiving treatment have viral suppression by 2025. Gabon is committed to these international goals, which are reflected in the PNLIST, as well as the PMLS strategies.

In Gabon, HIV/AIDS is a public health priority, with a national prevalence of 3% among adults aged 15–49 years old and an incidence rate of 1.15 per

1,000 population. Recent data estimate that 47,000 adults and children in Gabon are PLHIV, of whom 34,000 (72%) know their status and 25,000 (53%) have access to treatment (UNAIDS 2021).

The PNLIST has established several policies and practices to support HIV prevention and care, including adopting the “Test and Treat” policy, increasing HIV testing at all points-of-care facilities, offering free antiretroviral treatment (ART) and integrated service delivery for PLHIV, and rolling out of the first line medication, Dolutegravir, as endorsed by WHO.



Primary Challenge

Work still needs to be done in the areas of screening, treatment, and follow-up with PLHIV in order to interrupt HIV transmission. For example, as reported 72% of PLHIV know their status, as opposed to the target of 95%.

In Gabon, HIV screening is traditionally based on voluntary screening services in a subset of health facilities, recommendation of HIV screening for all pregnant women, and sporadic mass screening events. The reach of these approaches is limited, and additional barriers, such as lack of necessary testing supplies, can limit their effectiveness. Reversing the epidemic is not a simple objective and requires a more active approach for screening individuals potentially infected with HIV.

Solution: Index Case Screening

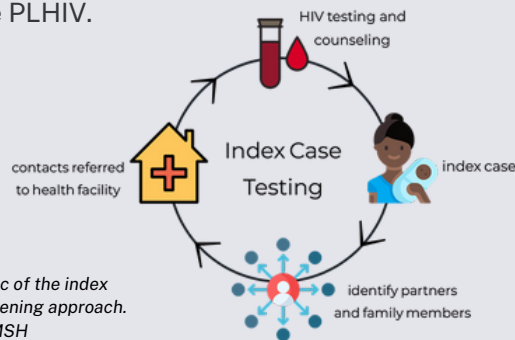
Gabon's PMLS, in collaboration with MCD, identified an opportunity to strengthen the HIV screening efforts in military health facilities. In December 2021, the Directorate General of the Military Health Service (DGSSM, by its French acronym), to whom the PMLS reports, officially launched Gabon's first ever index case screening program in military health facilities as a strategy to improve the UNAID first target (the number of people who know their HIV status).

In collaboration with the PMLS and PNLIST, MCD developed the Trainers' Guide on Safe and Ethical Index Testing to serve as a reference for health workers trained in this approach.

In May 2021, the PMLS and MCD organized a five-day training of trainers' workshop on index case screening for 17 health providers, including 15 from the military and two from the PNLIST.

What is Index Case Screening?

Index case screening is a WHO-endorsed approach in which close contacts (children, spouse, sexual partners, parents, siblings, and needle-sharing partners, as applicable) of an individual with a confirmed HIV-infection (the 'index' case) are offered HIV counseling and testing services with strict adherence to best practices of confidentiality and ethical care. Individuals identified with HIV are then referred for treatment and follow-up. It is an efficient strategy with a higher probability of identifying more PLHIV.



Participants in the index case screening training in Libreville completing group work.
Source: DHAPP Project

The participants included not only one general practitioner and five midwives, but also five psychologists, four social workers, two peer educators, and two representatives of the Gabonese Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (REGAP+, by its French acronym). Participants were also provided with tools for decreasing gender-based violence and increasing social support for survivors.

Implementation

The index case screening approach is now used in all military health facilities where PLHIV receive treatment and prevention of mother to child transmission (PMTCT) services: eight facilities in Libreville and three garrison infirmaries in interior Gabon (Mouila, Franceville, and Port-Gentil).

Each military health facility has one staff member assigned to the screening of index cases and recording of related data. Staff from military “AIDS Info Cells” were also trained on index case screening in providing support to the military health facilities when needed. In addition, HIV rapid diagnostic tests are provided to ensure that this effort is not challenged by a lack of access to necessary commodities.

Implementation challenges include an inefficient organization of health care staff roles and ineffective strategies to bring the PLHIV’s contacts for testing. In order to establish index case screening as a standard and sustainable approach, trained providers need support and opportunities to maintain their skills, and barriers for effective implementation need to be addressed.

Quarterly OTSS visits by PMLS supervisors are put in place with a focus on coaching and collaboratively solving problems. Quarterly data collection will also help monitor performance and pinpoint specific gaps for improvement.



Map showing the location of Gabon in Africa and the Gabonese cities where index case screening is implemented.

Source: MCD

Broader Outlook

The DHAPP program helps enhance the capacity for HIV screening and services for PLHIV in Gabon’s military health facilities, which, in turn, contributes toward relieving reference health structures, reducing stigma, and increasing the inclusion and care of new HIV positive cases. DHAPP’s pioneering of index case screening in military health facilities paves the way for tailoring this approach to the Gabonese context and introducing it in Gabon’s public health facilities.

