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## Advancing HIV Care and Prevention: Lessons from Elgeyo-Marakwet's Integrated Approach and Governance Strategies

County:	<b>Elgeyo Marakwet</b>		
Sector/s:	<b>Health</b>	Sub-sector/Theme:	<b>HIV</b>
Keywords: (for search in the online platform)	<b>HIV/AIDS, Elgeyo-Marakwet County, Integrated Approach, Governance Strategies, Operation Triple Zero (OTZ)</b>		
Target Audience:	<b>Counties</b>		
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### **Introduction**

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) attacks the body’s immune system, specifically the CD4 cells (T cells) critical for fighting infections. Without treatment, HIV reduces the number of these cells, making the body vulnerable to opportunistic infections. If left untreated, HIV leads to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), the final and most severe stage of the disease.

Since its discovery in the early 1980s, HIV has evolved from a poorly understood condition to one of the most researched diseases, with significant advances in management and prevention. Despite this progress, HIV remains a global concern, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority of new infections occur.



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<sup>1</sup>According to the National Syndemic Diseases Control Council (NSDCC), a state corporation established under Section 3 of the State Corporations Act, Cap 446, through the National AIDS Control Council Order of 1999, there are 1,378,457 individuals living with HIV in Kenya and 16,752 new infections as of 2024.

Although health is a devolved function in Kenya, both the National and County Governments, in partnership with various local and international organizations, collaborate to implement new initiatives and campaigns aimed at eradicating the spread of HIV. These efforts involve strengthening prevention strategies, expanding access to treatment, promoting awareness and addressing the stigma surrounding HIV, all aimed at reducing new infections and improving the quality of life for people living with the virus.

Elgeyo-Marakwet, situated in the former Rift Valley region has a population of 454,480 people comprising 227,317 females, 227,151 males and 12 intersex individuals. The County has 99,861 households, with an average household size of 4.5 persons and a population density of 150 people per square kilometer. The County has a population of 4,900 individuals living with HIV.

Iten County Referral Hospital handles a caseload of 1,200 HIV patients, providing monthly medical consultations that include viral load monitoring, management of new infections and medication refills. Kenya, like other parts of Africa faces several cross-cutting challenges in HIV prevention and treatment, including drug shortages, stigma, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, limited access to testing and counseling services and insufficient community awareness. Additionally, governance issues pose significant challenges, affecting coordination, resource allocation and the effective implementation of HIV-related programs. These obstacles collectively hinder efforts to provide timely care, reduce new infections and enhance the overall well-being of those living with HIV.

### **Implementation of the practice**

The County Government of Elgeyo-Marakwet has introduced a variety of interventions to tackle HIV, focusing on prevention, stigma reduction and the management of opportunistic diseases. One notable approach involves the use of telemedicine and technology to reach patients who face challenges in accessing healthcare. Through the Multi-Disciplinary Team Services (MDTS), healthcare professionals, including doctors, nutritionists and counselors schedule virtual consultations with patients. This enables them to monitor patients' conditions, provide guidance on improving health and offer preventive measures against common opportunistic diseases.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nsdcc.go.ke/>



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The County has established a system where patients with high viral loads, such as adolescents are scheduled for specific days of the week to receive comprehensive care. On these designated days, nutritionists, counselors and doctors meet with the patients to provide treatment, monitor their viral loads and offer tailored support.

Through the Operation Triple Zero (OTZ), a cost-effective and high-impact initiative aimed at achieving zero missed appointments, zero missed medication doses and zero detectable viral loads, there has been a notable reduction in stigma, particularly among adolescents. The County, through the OTZ program facilitates gatherings during school holidays and midterms, where adolescents come together to share knowledge and support each other.

To enhance tracking and update data on clients attending specific clinics for medical checkups and viral load counts, the County has established a hotline. This allows for follow-up with various facilities to ensure that if a client misses an appointment at one facility, their attendance at neighboring facilities is monitored.

The County through the Department of Reproductive Health has also incorporated psycho-social support efforts by organizing peer-to-peer meetings in the hospital grounds for patients who require additional guidance, especially for those who struggle with alcohol dependence. In these meetings, patients share strategies for managing their medication and maintaining their health. For example, those who consume alcohol may advise others to take their medication a few hours before drinking or discuss how adhering to a specific schedule has helped them manage their viral load and maintain their lifestyle.

All these initiatives are outlined in the annual work plans to facilitate their implementation throughout the year. This approach aids in collaborating with partners, as it clearly identifies the challenges and priorities for the County, allowing them to incorporate these aspects into their own work plans. The interventions have led to a 4% improvement in HIV suppression rates, increasing from 90% in 2023 to 94% in 2024. Additionally, HIV prevalence has decreased to 1.9% in 2024, down from 2.5% in 2022.

To address the challenge of new HIV infections, which increased to 40% in 2024 from 34% in 2023, particularly among teenagers the County has adopted a comprehensive governance approach.

In 2022, the County Government of Elgeyo-Marakwet also launched the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) hotline. This initiative enables the County to monitor and track documentation and records of new infections, as well as address challenges across different healthcare facilities.



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In 2023, the County began organizing peer-to-peer knowledge exchange forums, where specific groups of patients, such as those struggling with alcoholism and adolescents come together on a need basis and during school holidays. These forums provide a platform for discussing issues and challenges that are unique to their experiences.

In the same year, the County introduced a telemedicine approach using Multi-Disciplinary Team Services (MDTS). This allows patients to communicate with doctors and counselors handling HIV matters on need basis, anytime via phone calls, accessing health services and support from the convenience of their homes. So far over 50 patients have used this approach.

In 2024, the County, in partnership with the National Syndemic Diseases Control Council (NSDCC), designed the 2024-2028 Adolescent and Youth Program-Elgeyo-Marakwet County (AYP-EMC) guide to enhance and streamline strategies for improving health outcomes and support services for adolescents and youth in the County.

This guide, along with the County's HIV implementation plan and the HIV committee chaired by the Governor and deputized by the CEC for Health, ensures the sustainability of the County's initiatives to treat, prevent and manage HIV.



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Deputy Governor Prof. Grace Cheserek and Elgeyo Marakwet County residents marking World Aids Day.

### Results of the practice

**Improved HIV Suppression Rates:** Enhanced interventions have led to a 4% increase in HIV suppression rates, rising from 90% in 2023 to 94% in 2024.

**Reduced HIV Prevalence:** The prevalence of HIV has decreased to 1.9% in 2024, down from 2.5% in 2022.

**Enhanced Patient Support:** The PMTC hotline and telemedicine approach have improved patient monitoring and support, facilitating better management of new infections and ongoing care.

**Strengthened Governance:** The involvement of the Governor and the CEC for Health in overseeing the HIV committee has enhanced the governance and strategic direction of HIV-related initiatives, ensuring effective implementation and sustainability.

**Improved Adherence to Treatment:** The Multi-Disciplinary Team Services (MDTS) approach and scheduled consultations have supported better adherence to treatment regimens, resulting in improved health outcomes for patients.





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### Lessons learnt:

- **Integrated Approaches are Effective:** Combining telemedicine, peer-to-peer forums and comprehensive guidelines (such as the AYP-EMC guide) has proven effective in enhancing patient care and support. Integration of various services ensures that patients receive holistic care, addressing both medical and psychosocial needs.
- **Governance and Leadership Matter:** Strong governance and leadership, exemplified by the involvement of the governor and the CEC for Health, are crucial for the successful implementation and sustainability of HIV initiatives. Clear oversight and strategic direction help in effective resource allocation and program management.
- **Community Engagement Reduces Stigma:** Engaging the community through peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and support forums plays a significant role in reducing stigma associated with HIV. Providing a platform for patients to share their experiences fosters a supportive environment and encourages openness.
- **Technology Enhances Accessibility:** The use of telemedicine and hotlines has improved accessibility to healthcare services, especially for patients who face logistical challenges. Technology facilitates timely consultations and follow-ups, ensuring that patients remain connected to care.
- **Data Tracking and Coordination are Key:** Effective tracking of patient data and coordination between healthcare facilities are essential for managing HIV cases. Tools like the PMTC hotline help in monitoring patient records and ensuring continuity of care across different services.
- **Customized Support is Necessary:** Tailoring interventions to specific groups, such as adolescents or individuals with re-occurring conditions like alcoholism, improve the relevance and effectiveness of support services. Customization ensures that interventions address the unique challenges faced by these groups

### Conclusion

The County Government of Elgeyo-Marakwet has made significant strides in addressing HIV through a multifaceted approach that integrates innovative strategies, strong governance, and community engagement. By implementing programs such as the PMTC hotline, telemedicine, and peer-to-peer support forums, the County has effectively improved access to care, reduced stigma, and enhanced patient outcomes. The 4% increase in HIV suppression rates and the reduction in HIV prevalence from 2.5% to 1.9% highlight the success of these interventions. The ongoing commitment to innovation, coordination and support reflects a robust framework for achieving long-term success in the fight against HIV.