

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY: ENSURING ROBUST HIV HEALTH SERVICES

The successes of the Hartford Transitional Grant Area (TGA) and the strategies used for continued success despite challenges from COVID-19 and Mpox.

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About the Hartford TGA Ryan White Program

Approximately 1.2 million people in the U.S. have been infected by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).¹ Roughly 1 in 8 (13%) of people who have HIV are not aware of their status and need testing.¹ Many programs have been developed to increase awareness, prevention strategies, and care for people who live with HIV.

The Ryan White HIV/AIDS program (Ryan White), enacted in 1990, is the largest federal program designed specifically for people with HIV, serving over half of all those diagnosed.² Over time, the number of people living with HIV has grown and Ryan White remains a critical component of the U.S.' response to HIV.

Although Ryan White consists of five parts we will only focus on Ryan White Part A. Ryan White Part A provides funds to eligible metropolitan areas (EMAs) with 2,000+ reported AIDS cases over the past five years and transitional grant areas (TGAs), areas with 1,000 to 1,999 reported AIDS cases in the past 5 years. EMAs and TGAs with populations of at least 50,000 that meet the above criteria are provided funds

in order to provide medical and support services to cities and counties most severely affected by HIV.

The Hartford TGA consists of 3 counties: Hartford, Tolland, and Middlesex.³ The TGA was severely impacted by the HIV epidemic, particularly among minority populations, which bear a disproportionate burden of HIV disease. Relying on a coordinated continuum of care model, the services provided by Hartford TGA are a critical component of eliminating barriers, reducing disparities in access to care, engaging and maintaining persons with HIV in primary medical care, and improving health outcomes.

The emergence of COVID-19 and Mpox created additional challenges that made providing sexual health care difficult. The purpose of this paper is to document the main challenges for continued care and highlight the strategies that contributed to the Hartford TGA's success during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and during periods of high Mpox infection rates.

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Adversity Challenges



The main challenges the Hartford TGA experienced due to COVID-19 and Mpox can be categorized into four domains: isolation, stigma, population burden, and disruption of care. These challenges exacerbated the barriers to HIV health services.

individuals from adopting healthy behaviors.⁵ Additionally, stigma can result in social rejection, denied healthcare or needed services, and violence.⁶ All of these issues were present, in some capacity, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and may have interfered with the delivery of services.

Isolation

In order to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, and later Mpox, lockdown, quarantine, and isolation procedures were utilized throughout the U.S. people with HIV (PWH) may have been particularly vulnerable to isolation procedures because of perceived frailty, difficulty establishing social networks due to stigma, and loss of critical social networks.⁴ This reduced networking may reduce the chances of PWH to seek services and care.

Stigma

Stigma associated with Mpox and COVID-19 may create an additional barrier to healthcare that already burdens PWH. Stigma may make people more likely to hide illness, and avoid seeking healthcare immediately, and prevent

Population Burden

The COVID-19 pandemic created another burden for PWH that were already in distress. Most of the PWH that were served by the Greater Hartford TGA were historically underserved Black and Latino populations with high rates of poverty, drug use, unstable housing, and a history of stigma and discrimination. As a result, the consequences of contracting COVID-19, Mpox, and isolation/quarantine precautions were debilitated PWH. A large portion of people served in the Hartford TGA work in the service industry, and may not have robust employee benefits or savings to recuperate after an contracting COVID-19 or Mpox. Also, this type of work makes childcare difficult when a child needs to quarantine from daycare or school because of COVID-19.

All of these factors made creating time for HIV care difficult, and may have created a barrier to health care for PWH.

Another burden for PWH in the Greater Hartford TGA is unstable housing. Lack of housing has been identified as a structural barrier to HIV healthcare services.⁷ For this population, unstable housing was made more unstable by COVID-19 and Mpox. PWH that are homeless are harder to track and often don't receive the care that they need.

Disruption of Care

Hospitals and health care systems experienced staff shortages, an increased workload, and a shifting allocation of resources that may have decreased the capacity to provide care and protective equipment to PWH in the Greater Hartford TGA.⁸

There are four wellness centers in Hartford TGA that provide a social setting for PWH. These centers were closed during the pandemic and left many PWH in Hartford TGA with one less outlet for socialization and services.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, and in some instances during Mpox, there was also a reliance on telehealth services.⁹ Although telehealth is a useful way to attempt to continue care, the people seeking HIV care did not receive the

same quality of care from an in-person meeting. Often, a visit consisted of speaking with allied health professionals and multidisciplinary resources can be provided during the same visit. Telehealth provided less immediate access to resources and often required a stable internet connection.¹⁰ With a reduced team and limited resources, the establishment of goals and linkages to care and treatment were a challenge for the Hartford TGA.

Strategies to Care



In order to continue providing services during the COVID-19 pandemic and during periods of high Mpox infection rates, the Hartford TGA focused on three priority areas: Community engagement, partnerships, and performance measures. Hartford TGA used these resources concomitantly to reduce disruption in care and help maintain positive health outcomes.

Community Engagement

In their pursuit of meeting the unique needs of their communities during the COVID-19 epidemic, Hartford TGA demonstrated a commitment to community engagement. Recognizing the importance of understanding the specific challenges faced by individuals, they conducted a comprehensive COVID-19 survey that encompassed individuals who were out of care and those who were viremic. This valuable data provided crucial insights, allowing Hartford TGA to tailor their services accordingly.

To foster knowledge and empowerment, Hartford TGA organized monthly consumer education and information sessions, creating a platform for individuals to stay informed and actively participate in their own healthcare journey. Providers were guided to collaborate with the community in developing disaster protection plans, ensuring that the voices of those directly impacted were heard and integrated into the

decision-making process. Securing CARES Act funding was a significant achievement for Hartford TGA, enabling them to swiftly respond to community-driven COVID-19 emergencies. This financial support was strategically allocated to address urgent needs as identified by the community, providing vital resources to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

Hartford TGA maintained transparent communication with providers and PWH by delivering weekly written updates on changes to care protocols. This timely and consistent flow of information ensured that everyone involved had access to the latest developments, empowering them to make informed decisions and navigate the evolving healthcare landscape effectively.

In response to the ever-changing circumstances, the Hartford TGA demonstrated remarkable agility in adapting their service delivery system. They swiftly implemented DOCUSign software, enabling seamless remote documentation processes. Additionally, they established convenient drop-off and grab-N-Go services, ensuring uninterrupted access to essential resources and support.

Partnerships

Recognizing the importance of expanding their reach, Hartford TGA forged

partnerships with non-Ryan White sites. This collaboration allowed them to extend their support network, ensuring that individuals outside of their traditional scope received the necessary care and resources. By broadening their alliances, Hartford TGA demonstrated their determination to leave no one behind during these challenging times.

Hartford TGA joined forces with the UCONN Research Center to develop a specialized COVID-19 service. This collaboration yielded a comprehensive and tailored approach to address the unique needs and challenges posed by the pandemic. By leveraging their expertise and resources, Hartford TGA and the UCONN Research Center delivered targeted interventions and support, helping individuals navigate the complexities of COVID-19 with confidence.

Recognizing the power of collaboration, Hartford TGA fostered closer ties with the New Haven emergency metropolitan area (EMA) and the State of Connecticut HIV & Prevention programs. This strengthened partnership facilitated seamless coordination and information exchange, enabling a more unified and efficient response to the pandemic. The Connecticut department of public health also provided support by supplying HIV test kits and work with the Hartford TGA to ensure adequate care to Hartford residents. By working with key stakeholders, Hartford TGA ensured that their efforts were aligned with broader strategies and initiatives, maximizing the impact of their services. Many of these partnerships were also utilized during periods of high Mpox infection rates as well.

Performance Measures

Hartford TGA's commitment to performance management during the pandemic allowed them to continually evaluate and improve their services, ensuring that their community received the best possible care despite the challenging circumstances. By prioritizing performance monitoring, incorporating telemedicine, and fostering collaboration, Hartford TGA exemplified their dedication to delivering exceptional healthcare outcomes for their community,

Hartford TGA incorporated telemedicine into their services, understanding the importance of maintaining medical care while adhering to social distancing guidelines. Through regular performance evaluations, Hartford TGA could assess the effectiveness and efficiency of their telemedicine services, making necessary adjustments to optimize patient outcomes and satisfaction.

Furthermore, Hartford TGA emphasized collaboration and coordination as vital components of their performance management approach. By regularly assessing these collaborative partnerships and implementing feedback mechanisms, Hartford TGA ensured that their performance in delivering coordinated care remained at the highest standard.

Success Highlights

2019 - 2020 2020 - 2021
2100 **1450**
 2021 - 2022 2022 - 2023
1880 **1775**
Clients Served

155,887
Encounters (visits)


Clients HIV+

MARCH 01 2019 TO FEBRUARY 28 2023
 RYAN WHITE SNAPSHOT

Although the COVID-19 pandemic, and later Mpox, burdened the HIV community and healthcare system, the Hartford TGA maintained consistent performance measures and provided critical care. From March 2019 to February 2020, 2100 clients were served during 39,446 visits. From March 2020 to February 2021, 1450 clients were served during 29,620 visits. Recently, from March 2021 to February 2022, 1880 clients were served during 40,854 encounters and from March 2022 to February 2023, 1775 clients were served during 45,957 encounters.

From 2018 to 2023 the Hartford TGA's performance measures indicate continued success (Figure 1). The average percentage of prescription of antiretroviral therapy was 95%, and viral load suppression was 86% during this interval. Gaps in medical visits remained low during this interval with an average of 21%, and HIV risk counseling remained high with an average of 87%.

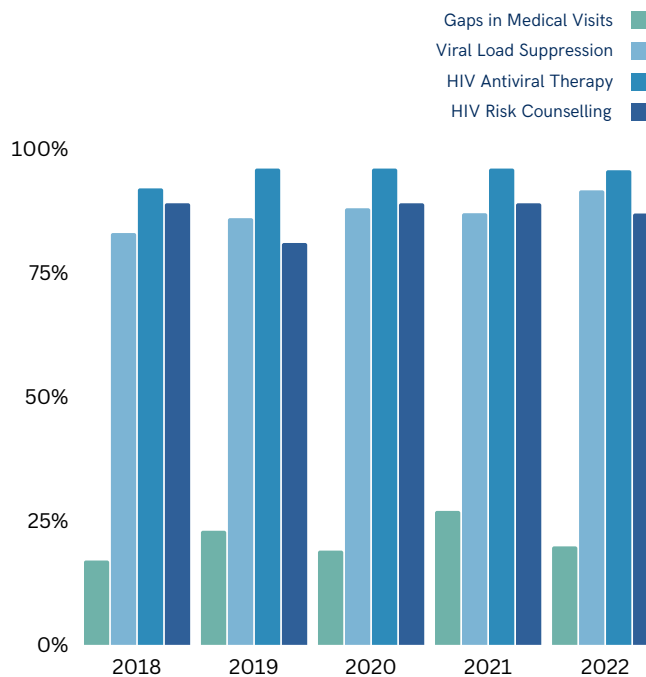


Figure 1. Hartford TGA performance measures (2018-2023).

Conclusion

Hartford TGA's successful strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic can serve as a guide for other organizations seeking to provide uninterrupted services and support to their communities. By adopting similar approaches, organizations can aim to achieve comparable results in their respective areas.

Firstly, prioritizing a commitment to performance management, helps to ensure the highest level of care for their community. Implementing effective strategies to monitor and evaluate services, helped to allocate resources to meet the specific needs of vulnerable populations.

Secondly, forging strong partnerships and collaborations with relevant stakeholders is key. By working closely with other institutions, such as research centers and local health departments, organizations can tap into additional resources, expertise, and funding opportunities. This collaboration enhances the coordination of efforts and promotes a comprehensive response to the evolving needs of the community.

Lastly, community engagement and empowerment should be at the forefront of any strategy. Providing education, information sessions, and involving the community in decision-making processes fosters a sense of ownership, unity, and resilience. It ensures that individuals are well-informed and actively involved in their own healthcare, contributing to better health outcomes.

By emulating these strategies and adapting them to their own contexts, organizations in different regions can strive to achieve similar positive results. The experiences of Hartford TGA serve as a valuable blueprint for others, demonstrating the potential impact of proactive measures, collaborative partnerships, technology integration, and community engagement in times of crisis.



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