

Breakout Session: Testing and prevention in a rural context

(Facilitator: Abu Hamour)

How can we overcome stigma and improve testing and prevention service utilization?

Culturally appropriate knowledge sharing through community partnerships and the standard distribution of pamphlets and brochures can help build awareness of HIV and reduce HIV-related stigma. Recruiting local individuals to champion HIV awareness as their cause may help community members to be more receptive to new information as it is coming from a trusted figure within their own community. Moreover, storytelling can serve as a powerful tool to engage communities and help build understanding and awareness. Venues such as health fairs and schools can also be used to disseminate information on HIV, testing, and prevention. Community event evenings to learn about HIV, participate in fun activities (e.g. pizza night), and get tested could be an additional way to engage small communities and breakdown stigma.

In addition to stigma, the physical location of testing services can create barriers to HIV testing access. Strategies to help overcome this could include: integrating HIV testing into routine care, utilizing rapid testing (in remote areas), having a mobile testing van, integrating testing into local community outreach facilities, and training public health nurses on HIV testing and educating the public.

Potential strategies to overcoming stigma and improving HIV service utilization in rural communities may include:

1. **Education:** encourage and educate physicians, nurses (specifically outreach nurses), and allied health professionals on HIV-related stigma and ways to approach HIV testing and prevention sensitively
2. **ASO Partnerships:** by partnering with AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs), newly diagnosed individuals and individuals living with HIV can connect through peer support and advocacy networks, and access further support services
3. **Routine HIV Testing:** establish routine testing to humanize and normalize HIV testing
4. **Mental health and addictions service partnerships:** partnerships with mental health and addictions services can support high-risk, and vulnerable individuals in accessing HIV testing, preventive and supportive care
5. **Correctional facility partnerships:** partnerships with correctional facilities can promote HCV, HIV, and TB testing and facilitate engagement into care; such partnerships can also establish grounds for a continuum of care for this population