

# Expert Clients

Supporting the continuum of HIV care in Malawi



PHOTO BY OVERTOUN MAZUNDA FOR CRS

Expert Clients are an integral part of the multi-disciplinary care team.

**“When you look at the data of HIV and ART services for this district, you can clearly see the difference in performance between health facilities which are within IMPACT targeted areas and which are outside the targeted area.”**

—Beatrice Chigamba,  
DHO representative,  
Chikwawa district

## Expert Clients: Trusted, credible service providers

Expert Clients are HIV-positive men and women who deliberately and skillfully use their own experiences living with HIV to help others overcome the many challenges inherent in an HIV-positive diagnosis. From 2011–2014, the USAID and PEPFAR-funded IMPACT program identified, placed and supported 158 Expert Clients in 79 rural health facilities in nine districts, demonstrating that this model can be successfully implemented at scale. They quickly established themselves as trusted, respected members of the multi-disciplinary HIV services team. They contribute to improving retention in care, increasing uptake of HIV services, reducing service provider workload and strengthening referral linkages.

### Expert Client help retain HIV patients in care

A baseline study (unpublished) conducted by CRS in 2011 revealed that when salaried Health Surveillance Assistants (HSAs) are tasked with tracing patients officially declared defaulters<sup>1</sup>, only 8.7% are returned to care. Now, where Expert Clients are in place, ART clerks, providers and health facility In-charges report higher numbers of clients retained in care; they attribute this directly to the efforts of the Expert Client. Expert Clients trace and retrieve into care patients who miss their medication refills or appointments **before they are officially classified as “defaulters.”** As shown in Table I, IMPACT program

<sup>1</sup> ART patients are officially declared “defaulters” when they have failed to present for a medication refill two months after their medications should have run out.

**“The Expert Client is vital to our system. I believe we cannot do without him.”**

—Hezekiah Mwale, Senior Clinician, Likangala Health Center, Zomba district



PHOTO BY OVERTOUN MAZUNDA FOR CRS

Expert Clients escort patients between services to ensure all referrals are completed.

monitoring data shows that Expert Clients identified a total of 6,571 patients who missed appointments and returned 3,380 (52%<sup>2</sup>) of them to care. Importantly, however, this figure under-represents the total number of patients who returned to care, as the IMPACT program data collection system did not allow for tracking individual clients over time but relied instead on numbers reported monthly.

**Table 1: Expert Clients track HIV patients individually and intervene quickly to ensure they are retained in care.**

	Total	Male	Female
# of HIV patients identified by Expert Clients as “missed appointments”	6,571	4,586 (70%)	1,985 (30%)
# of “missed appointments” patients located	4,768 (73% of total)	3,333 (70%)	1,435 (30%)
# of “missed appointments” patients returned to care*	3,380 (52% of total)	2,348 (69%)	1,032 (31%)

\*Patients located but not returned to care include those who have died, have left the catchment area, cannot be swayed from a decision to stop treatment, or who return to care only after the closing date of the reporting period.

2 IMPACT quarterly report to USAID, April 2014.

**“Before Expert Clients, we had problems on days when HSAs were in the communities because our clinic work was stalling. Even now, whenever an Expert Client does not come, the impact is felt. For example, patient files are not sorted out before the patients arrive. But when Expert Clients are here, all of us work effectively.”**

—Rose Njerere,  
HSA, Domasi Rural Hospital,  
Zomba district



PHOTO BY OVERTOUN MAZUNDA FOR CRS

Expert Clients assist by ensuring that each patient's weight is monitored, conscious that weight loss is an early indicator of treatment failure.

### **Increased uptake of HIV services**

A recent study<sup>3</sup> commissioned by IMPACT revealed that salaried service providers believe that Expert Clients are contributing to improved quality of HIV services and have increased the uptake of HIV testing and treatment. Although Expert Clients are based in the facility, they are often approached in the community by individuals who have questions related to HIV transmission, prevention, side effects of medication and disclosure challenges. Their familiarity with the inner workings of the community, the histories of its members, and the local language and customs gives Expert Clients a distinct advantage over salaried service providers who come from other parts of the country. They bring essential role modeling to their own rural communities, reducing stigma with their openness and proactively reaching out to their neighbors to encourage testing and treatment.

### **Reduced workload for salaried HIV service providers**

Expert Clients have helped to free up HIV service providers to do work that they could not have otherwise done. Every day, Expert Clients conduct treatment education sessions for pre-ART patients; check patients' weights; pull master cards (clients' records of HIV care and treatment) for expected clients and file them after each visit; pack medications in preparation for distribution and distribute bednets, soap and buckets to antenatal mothers. Expert Clients guide patients to various departments within health facilities and identify very sick patients from the outpatient department to ensure they are fast-tracked for service. Each of these tasks serves to reduce staff workload and address congestion and distress among patients. Salaried HIV service providers note that operating hours in ART and PMTCT clinics have been reduced (often by 5 or 6 hours) since Expert Clients were introduced. This gives service providers time to do other duties.

It is widely acknowledged that Health Surveillance Assistants (HSAs) have multiple roles and struggle to concentrate on ART services. Expert Client deployment has reduced the workload of both ART service providers and HSAs. Several salaried health care providers recommend that the Expert Client model be expanded to all ART service delivery points.

<sup>3</sup> Catholic Relief Services (2014). The Expert Client Model: Peer-based Support to the Continuum of HIV Care in Malawi. Lilongwe, Malawi



CHIKWAWA DIOCESE



## Recommendations for future implementation

### Shift the responsibility of supervision

HSA's are, by the nature of their jobs, working outside the facility and are often not available to supervise Expert Clients. Placing the responsibility of supervision with member of staff serving as In-charge (instead of the Senior HSA) facilitates on-the-job supervision and mentoring.

### Encourage the District Health Management Team and the National Association for PLHIV in Malawi (NAPHAM) representatives to conduct regular site visits and re-orientation

Regular quarterly supervisory visits and re-orientations of the Expert Client mandate and performance are needed to identify and promptly address conflicts, bottlenecks or concerns.

### Adjust and standardize Expert Client incentives/stipend

Though they are not paid as staff, Expert Clients currently receive different incentives or stipends depending on the IMPACT partner organization to which they are attached. Stipends should be regularly revised to keep pace with the cost of living and should be provided on a regular, reliable basis. The program should consider providing standardized incentives across all operational districts and should ensure the stipend is sufficient to support the cost of bicycle maintenance.

### Provide uniforms or a standard means of identification

Expert Clients are not usually provided uniforms, so they typically wear different *zitenje* cloths or t-shirts, which do not look professional. Expert Clients are visible to the public as they handle sensitive documents and medications, and they conduct confidential counseling sessions with patients. The appearance of "informal" lay personnel performing these duties could be confusing or even distressing to the public. Provision of uniforms is not only an important incentive to Expert Clients—it is also a public relations imperative.

## Next steps

By all accounts, the Expert Client model is well accepted within the health facility architecture. With appropriate supervisory support, Expert Clients are able to absorb a range of tasks, thereby easing workload and stress for salaried HIV service providers. This model is especially relevant in remote areas, where the majority of Malawi's population lives and where health care providers are in short supply.

Of equal importance, as true peers of those they serve, Expert Clients bring a unique and vital skillset to the multi-disciplinary care team. This skillset improves the quality, efficiency and coverage of services. The low-cost Expert Client model increases uptake of HIV testing and treatment services and helps retain patients in care, making it highly relevant to a resource-constrained setting like Malawi.

This publication made possible by the generous support of the American people through USAID.

### Integrated (HIV Effect) Mitigation and Positive Action for Community Transformation

(IMPACT) is a four-year USAID-supported Global Development Alliance program that aims to improve the quality of life for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) and people living with HIV (PLHIV). As lead agency of the IMPACT Program, Catholic Relief Services Malawi brings together twelve consortium partners to expand service access and relevance in partnership with the Government of Malawi.

### Catholic Relief Services – Malawi

For more information about IMPACT's work, email:

[Malawi@global.crs.org](mailto:Malawi@global.crs.org)

or visit

[crsprogramquality.org](http://crsprogramquality.org)