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New Hope with *New Start*

The Program Which Paved the Way for VCT in 20 Countries

The success of a PSI pilot project in Zimbabwe, which used social marketing to stimulate demand for voluntary HIV counseling and testing (VCT), spurred the expansion of VCT and the creation of the *New Start* network of 20 VCT centers nationwide. Such an impression has *New Start* made upon Zimbabwean society that the government has immortalized the VCT network with its own postage stamp, believed to be a first in the short history of VCT. The achievements of the *New Start* network have prompted PSI to develop VCT programs in 19 other countries in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. In 2004, VCT centers in these 20 countries are expected to counsel and test more than 300,000 clients.

The success of *New Start* and the steady rise in client numbers at its 20 centers show that an increasing number of Zimbabweans want to know their HIV status. But learning one's status can be a daunting proposition in a country where one in four people between the ages of 15 and 49 are already HIV positive and more than 3,000 people die every week from AIDS-related causes.

The HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis Unit of the Zimbabwean Ministry of Health and Child Welfare began implementing a national VCT network in 1999 with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and technical and managerial assistance from PSI.

The *New Start* network emphasizes quality counseling and testing. Counseling at *New Start* centers is performed by trained counselors before and after the HIV test, and employs customized risk-reduction strategies to motivate behavior change.

Research demonstrates that VCT is an effective and cost-efficient prevention intervention that results in sustained behavior change, including increased condom use and partner reduction, whether the clients test positive or negative. Although VCT is sometimes seen as expensive compared to other prevention interventions, *New Start* in Zimbabwe has reduced its cost per client served from \$345 in 1999 to \$23 in 2003 (PSI includes all possible costs in its calculations), a drop of 93%.

A 2004 review of client records reveals the profile of the typical *New Start* client: Slightly more than half are male (52%) and have never been married (51%). Most are between 20 and 29 years old (56%) and have a secondary school education (64%). Data shows that 19% are found HIV positive and that women are exposed much earlier than their male



PSI/Zimbabwe promotes its *New Start* voluntary counseling and testing centers in a variety of ways, including this TV spot.



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counterparts. A majority (68%) first heard about New Start through mass media channels such as television and radio.

Quality Sets New Start Apart

New Start was launched in 1999 with one center, and has grown into a network of 20 centers throughout the country, plus four mobile units targeting rural areas not served by a full-time center. The network has seen over 300,000 clients through June 2004 and the average number of monthly clients served has increased from 230 in 1999 to 13,000 in 2004.

Because New Start employs a “social franchising” model, thirteen of these centers integrate VCT services into existing health service delivery institutions, such as public clinics and hospitals, non-governmental organizations and private health facilities. The other seven centers are “free-standing” sites, meaning they are operated and managed directly by PSI.

In 2001, the New Start network adopted a new testing technology with rapid HIV testing which produce results within an hour. The introduction of rapid testing increased the portion of clients who returned to receive their results from 77% to 97%. Demand for the service also increased substantially as the new convenient nature of the services was promoted to potential clients.

The Government of Zimbabwe worked with PSI, USAID and Family Health International to develop national counseling and testing protocols. New Start counselors are trained in these protocols and procedures to provide on-site, confidential HIV testing, combined with pre- and post-test counseling sessions that include referrals — when appropriate — to community care and support groups. By establishing the centers in high traffic areas or at institutions that already provide health-related services, the New Start network helps reduce the uneasiness many VCT clients feel in seeking these services.

Quality is maintained through agreements between PSI/Zimbabwe and the health centers that stipulate the standards to which the centers must adhere, and by regularly conducting “mystery client surveys” in which researchers pose as clients. PSI conducts regular client

exit surveys and ongoing site visits by senior network managers to ensure high quality is maintained. New Start counselors undergo extensive initial and follow-up training, and are supervised by a senior counselor. Finally, testing is regularly monitored through ongoing quality control measures, including a percentage of samples undergoing further testing at a reference laboratory.

Strategic Communication

At the heart of the success of New Start are strategic and culturally appropriate multimedia communication campaigns that are based on an in-depth understanding of the barriers and potential “triggers” associated with HIV testing. Great care is taken to understand the target consumers and design messages that are empowering, positive and offer hope. Messages reach the target groups through a variety of mass media such as television, radio and print. Interpersonal communication is also utilized to communicate messages about VCT services and the benefits of knowing one’s HIV status.

New Start VCT services are targeted to specific groups, including young couples, adolescents, commercial sex workers, transport industry workers and other “mobile” populations, and are offered at prices these groups can afford.

New Start Plus

Beginning in October 2002, PSI/Zimbabwe launched *New Start Plus*, an integration of sexually-transmitted infection (STI) management and family planning services into VCT delivery and the existing New Start centers. Its purpose is to increase the use of VCT services by sexually-active Zimbabweans and the use of quality STI and family planning services by New Start VCT clients. Today, New Start Plus operates out of seven of the 20 New Start sites, and the most popular service offered at New Start Plus is STI treatment and partner referral.

VCT Expands Far Beyond Zimbabwe

The success of New Start has encouraged PSI to start up VCT programs far beyond the borders of Zimbabwe. As of August 2004, PSI implements VCT projects in 20 countries worldwide. In addition to Zimbabwe, PSI implements VCT programs in Angola, Benin, Botswana, Cambodia, Côte d’Ivoire, Guyana, Haiti, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Togo, Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa and Zambia.



PSI/Zimbabwe’s New Start centers provide voluntary HIV testing and counseling services. Their success and value to Zimbabwean society is reflected in this postal stamp, issued by the Posts and Telegraph Department independent of any PSI activity or advocacy.

PSI’s Core Values:

Bottom Line Health Impact • Private Sector Speed and Efficiency • Decentralization, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship • Long-term Commitment to the People We Serve