

SUCCESS STORY

Improving Antiretroviral Treatment Optimization Among Children and Adolescents: The Kiyunga HCIV Experience

USAID'S REGIONAL HEALTH INTEGRATION TO ENHANCE SERVICES IN EAST CENTRAL UGANDA (USAID RHITES-EC)

Bwaira Moreen a clinical officer, started work at Kiyunga HC IV's HIV treatment clinic in June 2020. One of her first tasks on joining the health facility was to review all children and adolescents' files to ensure they had recent viral load test results (not more than six months old) and ensure that they regularly visited the clinic for drug refills and clinical assessments.

Taking regular viral load tests and clinical assessments helps ensure that all growing children are taking an appropriate antiretroviral treatment regimen at the correct dose for weight and age, with minimal side effects, that is still potent enough to keep the HIV virus suppressed. The Ugandan Ministry of Health HIV Care and Treatment Guidelines 2020 aim to optimize pediatric and adolescent treatment by switching and substituting old regimens for safer and well tolerated regimens to ensure HIV treatment success i.e. an HIV patient who is virally suppressed and not having any opportunistic infections.

Historically, viral suppression among children and adolescents on HIV treatment is lower than that of adults, partly because of their dependence on adult caregivers to access health information and services. During the visits, counsellors provided support and education to clients and caregivers to understand the reason for those on new antiretroviral medication and encouraged treatment adherence for clients switching to a different line regimen.



Ms. Bwaira reviewing the HIV treatment files of children and adolescents © USAID RHITES-EC 2021

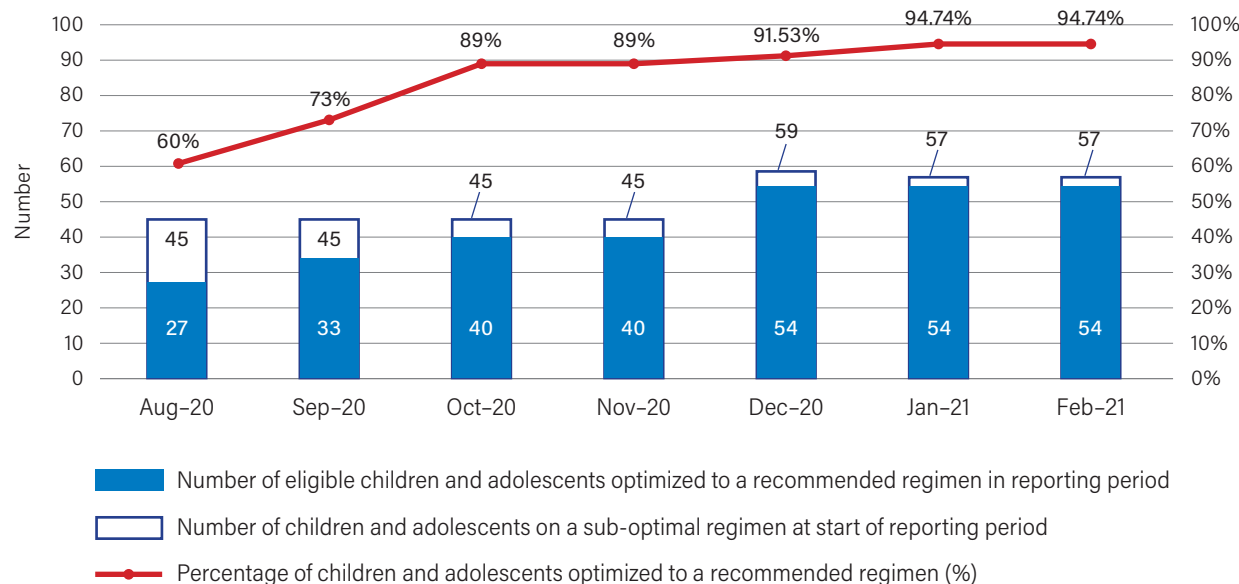
"Life is so much better because I no longer experience drug side effects, and I am happy because I now take only one pill in a day" says Kiirya an adolescent living with HIV.

One of the adolescents living with HIV reviewed by Ms. Bwaira was fifteen-year-old Kiirya who had a high viral load. Following a timely clinical review, Kiirya had his medication changed from three pills a day (AZT-3TC-Nevirapine) to just a single pill (TLD). His last HIV viral load after the change in medication was undetectable.

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Figure 1. The percentage of children and adolescents optimized to a recommended regimen improved from 60% in August 2020 to 94.7% by February 2021 at Kiyunga HC IV.



USAID Regional Health Integration to Enhance Services in East Central Uganda (USAID RHITES-EC) supports Kiyunga HCIV in Luuka district and 133 other health facilities in the East Central region to improve the quality and availability of HIV care and treatment. The support includes increasing access to ART optimization for all children and adolescents by training health workers like Ms. Bwaira that treat people living with HIV on the most up to date ministry of health guidelines and ensuring they have adequate stock of appropriate antiretroviral drugs to fulfil the new prescriptions.

“Following our training on the revised ministry of health HIV treatment guidelines, we received both hard and soft copies of the guidelines from RHITES-EC that we can quickly refer to,” confirms Ms. Bwaira.

This comprehensive training also covered documenting, forecasting, and making appropriate orders for the newly optimized regimens. The facility was struggling with stock-

outs of dolutegravir, an antiretroviral drug recommended for optimizing children, adolescents, and adults under the revised Uganda Ministry of Health HIV guidelines. As a result of this training and other onsite mentorship support, active participation in the Uganda Ministry of Health pediatric and adolescent HIV quality improvement collaborative as well as the diligent efforts of health workers like Ms. Bwaira the proportion of children optimized at Kiyunga HCIV significantly improved from 60% in August 2020 to 94.7% by February 2021 (See **Figure 1**).

USAID RHITES-EC implemented these same interventions at 134 healthcare facilities in East Central Uganda by the end of March 2021, 98% (3987/4036) of all children and adolescents 0-19 years on first line HIV treatment had been optimized to appropriate and efficacious antiretroviral regimens. As a result of this optimization and other efforts HIV viral load suppression for children and adolescents 0-19 years in East Central Uganda has significantly improved from 64.9% (April 2019-March 2020) to 75.5% (April 2020-March 2021).