

Advocating for Access to PrEP and Viral Load Testing In Malawi: 2017- Grace Kumwenda

In April 2017, I joined the AVAC global family as an advocate fellow from Malawi. My fellowship aimed to advocate for PrEP and Viral Load Testing in Malawi. The work was being built upon two years of PrEP advocacy from previous two fellows (2016 and 2015). For PrEP, my main agenda was to advocate for PrEP guidelines in Malawi and for Viral load testing I started the project with an objective of advocating for increased resources towards VLT. Other than the high level agendas, I also planned to work with female sex workers to raise awareness about the two issues and also create advocate champions to demand for the services. The fellowship was implemented across a 12 month period.

Starting the fellowship- my fears:

In April 2017 I got a chance to interact with previous 2016 fellows at an orientation meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa. Each one of the fellows presented the amazing achievement of their work and it immediately made me feel overwhelmed and scared on the path I was about to start. I felt small against the achievement the previous fellows had achieved. I had so many questions, where will I begin this work, who will be my first contact, is this even possible? All these questions raised a lot of nervous energy in me. The weeks that followed I had to face my fears and my doubts and take the first bold step of meeting my first contact

Through the mentorship from AVAC, I mapped out key allies and key targets. I needed to build relationships and partnerships. The work started with having one-on-one meetings with key policy makers and partners. The aim was to introduce my fellowship to them and find right platforms of engagement. I met key leaders in the ministry of health, National AIDS Commission, Civil Society and that started a year's long collaboration and advocacy.

Windows of Opportunity

My first big meeting to attend was a technical working group under ministry of health. This meeting was technical in every sense of the word. The language and the expertise in the room was incredible. I had travelled four hours to attend the meeting. PrEP was on the agenda that day. The presentation on this agenda item shared experiences from a learning visit to South Africa which was facilitated by CHAI. At the end of that presentation MoH shared that based on the challenges experienced by South Africa's PrEP roll out, Malawi will not be recommending PrEP. This was a window of opportunity to engage and discuss possibilities and evidence. That meeting led to the formation of a PrEP task force which engaged on language for the guidelines and also developed a data bank for PrEP. Months down the road Malawi is about to roll out two demonstration studies on PrEP.

My Work in the Year:

As part of the fellowship I implemented several activities such as engaging with female sex workers on PrEP and viral load testing as part of awareness raising, development of viral load testing fact sheet, facilitating CSO meetings on PrEP and Viral Load testing. I also engaged and participated in key forums that are important platforms for advocacy including PMTCT/Treatment Technical Working Group, KP

TWG and PrEP task force. I also engaged in global conversations around the global coalition for HIV prevention in CSO platforms.

Reflections

Over a year of the fellowship, I had an opportunity to sit in very important platforms and use my voice as an advocate. I got to understand the importance of evidence and research in building advocacy. The year equipped me with a lot of knowledge, expertise and skill to use HIV science and research in advocacy. Attending conferences such as CROI and participating in webinars coupled with mentorship and coaching from AVAC supported my work.