



Press Release

Lisbon, November 28, 2021

## **HIV, viral hepatitis, and STIs: Let's make up for lost time against the epidemics!**

*While COVID-19 has led to a sharp decline in HIV testing among the most vulnerable populations, the International and European Testing Weeks, organized by Coalition PLUS and EuroTEST from November 22 to 28, 2021, have mobilized actors in the fight against HIV, viral hepatitis, and STIs to make up for lost time in responding to the epidemics.*

[According to a study conducted in 44 countries](#), there was a 35% drop in HIV screenings between 2019 and 2020. This worrying figure was presented by the [WHO](#) at the launch of the International and European Testing Weeks on 22 November 2021 in Lisbon. Even more serious, this drastic drop in testing affects more specifically the populations most vulnerable to the epidemic. For example, among sex workers, who were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of HIV tests has fallen by 59% between 2019 and 2020.

*"Like AIDS before it, COVID-19 has highlighted the strong inequalities that persist in access to health care," says Hakima Himmich, Coalition PLUS President. "Under these circumstances, we must not relax our efforts: the fight against HIV, especially among the most vulnerable populations, must remain a priority for global public health, or we risk seeing a resurgence of the epidemic!"*

While there is a great deal of variety among the communities in the 90+ countries engaged in these testing weeks, late presentation – persons entering care perhaps several years after infection – is far too common in all of them. *"I was a late presenter for HIV myself",* said Ben Collins, chair of European Testing Week. *"But that was early on in the HIV epidemic – the 1980's – when effective treatments were not available. Today there is every good reason for anyone who may be at risk for HIV, viral hepatitis or STIs to get tested this week or any week of the year".*

### **Global mobilization of actors in the fight against HIV and AIDS**

To overcome these challenges, from November 22 to 28, 2021, civil society organisations, testing centers and government bodies in over 90 countries intensified their testing messaging and activities for HIV, viral hepatitis and other sexually transmitted infections, as part of the International and European Testing Weeks, promoted by Coalition PLUS and EuroTEST.

The mobilization of those most affected by these epidemics, through community-based testing, is one of the keys to accelerate the response, in complementarity with health systems, and ensures that countries achieve the goal of eliminating these infections as public health threats by 2030.

*"On the first day of Testing Week alone, we tested 6 people positive for HIV and 11 positive for hepatitis C at a single drug injection site in Lisbon," said Luis Mendao, President of GAT and member of the Board of Directors of Coalition PLUS. "This demonstrates once again the value of outreach testing strategies by and for communities most vulnerable to HIV and viral hepatitis!"*

*"It has been amazing to see these communities all over the world uniting this week to promote testing", said Daniel Simoes, Co-Chair of the EuroTEST Steering Committee. "Since the first European Testing Week in 2013, we have come a long way and it's great to see continuously growing momentum for a worldwide response to these infections with a focus on integrated testing, self-testing, and earlier access to quality care and life saving treatment, especially with COVID still being a major concern. We know that community-centered approaches can reduce stigma, engage reluctant testers and efficiently link people to care, so we really need to implement these at scale."*

## **Removing barriers to the provision of services at community-level is key**

As the populations most affected by HIV are often those most distant from formal health services, and face multiple layers of stigma, discrimination and even criminalization, investing in strategies designed and implemented at the community level is a crucial step in effectively reaching these groups, and ensuring their access to prevention and testing services, as well as links to formal health responses.

With these key population groups being the most affected by HIV, viral hepatitis and STIs across the globe, it is paramount to remove legal and regulatory obstacles to the provision of services at the community level, and foster their implementation, if we are to reach the global goals set for 2030, which aim to control these infections as public health threats.

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**About Coalition PLUS:** Coalition PLUS is an international union of community-based HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis organizations created in 2008, working in 52 countries and with over 100 civil society organizations. Our member associations and partners involve communities most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and hepatitis in the definition and implementation of prevention, care and advocacy programs. They promote innovative methods adapted to those most discriminated against in access to health care. Our values: respect for diversity and non-judgment, solidarity, innovation.

**About International HIV Testing Week:** International HIV Testing Week was initiated for the first time in 2020 by Coalition PLUS, an international network fighting AIDS and viral hepatitis. It aims to raise awareness of early testing for HIV, viral hepatitis B and C, sexually transmitted infections and certain human papillomavirus (HPV)-related cancers among the most vulnerable populations, as well as to promote innovative testing tools, such as the HIV self-test. Organised with the support of Agence Française du Développement (AFD), L'Initiative d'Expertise France, the Robert Carr Fund and

Aidsfonds, the second edition of this global initiative will take place from 22 to 28 November 2021 in 40 countries on 5 continents.

[Learn more about the International testing Week](#)

**About the European Testing Week:** European Testing Week is a European campaign that encourages partner organisations — in community, health care and policy institutions — throughout Europe to unite for one week twice a year to increase testing efforts and promote awareness on the benefits of earlier hepatitis and HIV testing. This initiative has progressed since its start in 2013 and has grown to be a widely recognised European event with hundreds of organisations participating every year.

Learn more at <http://www.testingweek.eu/>