

Title: Building virtual communities for improving the quality of HIV services in military health systems

Congress Theme: Global Health

Author: Steven Wiersma, MD, MPH

Co-Authors: Jorge Martins, BA; Michele Merkel, MS; Ekaterina Milgotina, MS, PhD

Institution: US Department of Defense HIV/AIDS Prevention Program (DHAPP), Global Scientific Solutions for Health (GSSHealth)

Summary

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has had a devastating impact on many militaries and uniformed organizations worldwide, posing risks to military personnel and impeding peacekeeping operations.

For over 20 years, the US Department of Defense HIV/AIDS Prevention Program (DHAPP) has assisted foreign military partners with the development and implementation of military-specific HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and treatment programs globally.

To democratize HIV epidemic control knowledge and best practices with military partner stakeholders, DHAPP partnered with Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) and established the DHAPP ECHO Program. The objective of this program is to create virtual communities of practice (VCoP), a sustainable network of country-based military hubs, to host country-relevant virtual educational clinics.

Methods-Results

Country-level VCoPs have been implemented through collaboration between DHAPP and military leaders, which has involved comprehensive strategic planning meetings, the provision of implementation materials, procedural guidance, curriculum development, and logistical support.

Importantly, the country-level VCoPs are designed and led by local military leaders. Hubs are strategically selected to strengthen the expertise of providers within primary care settings through regular virtual educational clinics with participation from local experts offering didactic lectures, mentorship, and consultative feedback on patient cases. The established hubs disseminate relevant and up-to-date HIV/AIDS information to deployed and remote healthcare workers.

The DHAPP ECHO program has successfully supported the implementation of the VCoP models in seven partner militaries in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central America between June 2021 and March 2022. The number of sites reached per country ranges between 7 and 66, and the number of participants by session between 20 and 130.

Conclusions

The DHAPP ECHO Program has improved the dialogue between medical staff at health care delivery sites by expanding the knowledge sharing to remote areas, including support for deployed military members. Its approach can be replicated and amplified in different geographic locations to improve the quality of care for patients while expanding the educational reach to military HIV clinical staff globally.

Keywords

project ECHO; virtual communities of practice; vcop; telementoring; clinician education;
HIV; military; navy; virtual communities of practice; hub