



# Steps towards safer drug use:

Establishing harm reduction services, capacity and policies for people who use drugs in South Africa (2013 – 2020)

**MAINline**

## BACKGROUND

TB HIV Care has been at the forefront of harm reduction in South Africa since 2013. It launched the Step Up Project in 2015 to address the risks faced by people who use drugs. Step Up follows global best practice and provides harm reduction services, including needle and syringe services; opioid substitution therapy (OST); HIV, STI, TB and viral hepatitis testing and linkage to care; psychosocial services, and community empowerment to people who use drugs. The project operates mobile outreach services in Cape Town, Durban, Pietermaritzburg and Port Elizabeth, with drop-in centres in the three largest cities. People who use drugs in South Africa are criminalised and experience stigma and discrimination from the general public, health providers and law enforcement. People who inject drugs are particularly vulnerable to blood-borne infections, like HIV and viral hepatitis, as well as overdose.

**“ I know when there weren't [project supplied] needles around... It was so scary to me. You would see three people on one needle. I don't see that anymore! And that is a relief.” – 32-year-old, male client, Cape Town.**

TB HIV Care has partnered with Mainline since 2013, and in the last seven years, collaborated on a range of projects. Together, novel, innovative services have been customised and implemented locally to address the unmet needs of people who use drugs in South Africa. This partnership has improved the lives of thousands of people, nurtured the region's first group of harm reduction practitioners, enhanced organisational practice, and altered the local and regional policy landscape. TB HIV Care has demonstrated the effectiveness of harm reduction as an alternative to abstinence-only or punitive approaches to managing problematic drug use.

## IMPACT

Funding through Bridging the Gaps, the Global Fund, Open Society Foundations and the Cape Town Central City Improvement District has enabled harm reduction training, increased coverage of needle and syringe services and OST access. Mainline technical support has created a strong cadre of harm reduction practitioners and human rights defenders, as well as fostered nascent initiatives for women who use drugs, for people who use stimulants, for overdose prevention and encouraged working with police. Communities of people who use drugs have been empowered through Community Advisory Groups which were made possible by support from Mainline.

TB HIV Care has ensured that people who use drugs were included and represented in policy processes affecting them, and human right violations against them have been documented and advocated against.

An alliance with Mainline empowered TB HIV Care to overcome challenges like donor and government reluctance to procure needles, and to enhance service quality. The project halved the sharing of injecting equipment in Cape Town from 37% in 2013 to 15% in 2017, reaching a point where 81% of people who inject drugs reported using a new needle the last time they injected.<sup>1</sup> Statistically significant reductions in heroin use and increased physical and mental health have been documented among clients on OST.<sup>2,3</sup>

With Mainline's support, progress has been made to address the psychosocial needs of clients<sup>4</sup> and staff, and break past moral, programmatic<sup>5</sup> and policy roadblocks<sup>6</sup> against evidence-based and effective services for people who use drugs in South Africa.

“ The OST Programme has transformed my life – I feel like a different person”

– 25-year-old female client, Durban

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While the achievements have been substantial, there are still many areas for extension and improvement of harm reduction services in South Africa:

- Harm reduction services need to be drastically scaled up. For HIV and HCV epidemic control, the number of needles distributed needs to double, OST coverage to increase at least ten fold, and services should be extended into new areas.
- The exorbitant cost of methadone remains the most significant barrier to OST access and needs to be urgently reduced through continued pressure on the government.
- TB HIV Care has amassed an important locally specific body of knowledge and evidence about effective practices. These should be developed into accessible, local guidelines.
- Advocacy, engagement and partnership need to continue to ensure that the commitments made in national policy to improve the health and well-being of people who use drugs, are realised.
- There is still too little knowledge about and support for harm reduction in the general population. A campaign to educate people about human rights, about drug use and harm reduction should be implemented. This can include training key media outlets to ensure that their reporting and representation is appropriate.
- Interrupting the supply of sterile injecting equipment is a rights violation and has important public health ramifications. The consequences of halting needle and syringe services - like the halting of these services in Durban for over 2 years - should be shared. The lessons should be used to strengthen support for this effective, evidence-based and cost saving intervention.
- Services currently do not meet the needs of sub-populations of people who use drugs, or people who use stimulants. Harm reduction services addressing the needs of women who use drugs, youth and for people who use stimulants need to be expanded, and services for people who use drugs who are in prison need to be piloted.
- The sustainability of harm reduction services requires integration into the health and social service system and local financing. Steps towards greater support and integration with existing HIV and TB programmes at community levels should continue, and plans made for domestic financing.
- Stigma and discrimination within healthcare facilities, often due to misunderstandings and limited training, are barriers to achieving health for people who use drugs. Healthcare providers in the public health sector need additional training around harm reduction, evidence-based interventions and the rights of people who use drugs in order to shift perspectives from abstinence as the only option.



## TIMELINE

### 2013

- **STUDY:** South Africa's first multi-city HIV survey among people who inject drugs
- **SIDE-MEETING:** HIV and people who inject drugs in Africa side-meeting at 17th ICASA Conference in Cape Town
- **MEETING:** Harm reduction for men who have sex with men (Mainline, Anova Health Institute, TB HIV Care)

### 2014

- **CONSULTATIONS:** Facilitation of national and local stakeholder engagements around harm reduction, including a national consultation with people who use drugs - making space for service delivery and policy debate to take place
- **STUDY TOUR:** Harm reduction study tour to Tanzania

### 2015

- **STUDY:** Mapping and formative assessment of people who inject drugs in Cape Town and Durban
- **LAUNCH:** The Step Up Project, including needle and syringe services, is launched in Cape Town and Durban
- **TRAINING:** Mainline provides virtual training and support for harm reduction service delivery, followed by in-the-field capacity building
- **TOOLS:** Mainline facilitates training on human rights and co-develop a tool to record violations
- **PRE-CONFERENCE:** TB HIV Care co-hosts a Drug Use and HIV pre-conference - where Mainline presents around human rights
- **WORKSHOP:** Facilitation of a harm reduction skills-building workshop and poster presentation at the 7th South African AIDS Conference

### 2016

- **STUDY:** Mainline conducts an assessment of harm reduction services
- **CONFERENCE:** First SA Drug Policy Week (RUN2016)
- **NETWORKING ZONE:** At the 21st International AIDS Conference
- **ROUNDTABLE:** Law enforcement roundtable at the 21st International AIDS Conference
- **PRESENTATIONS:** At the 21st International AIDS Conference and HIV-viral hepatitis pre-conference
- **WORKSHOPS:** With the Durban University of Technology, co-hosts four workshops with law enforcement around harm reduction in Durban - improving relationships and opportunities for collaboration
- **CONSULTATION:** Co-hosts consultations with people who use drugs in three cities to inform the National Drug Master Plan
- **ADVOCACY:** Involved in Support Don't Punish March in Mitchell's Plain in Cape Town.
- **NETWORKS:** Mainline support towards establishment of



Drug Users of Gauteng and Cape Town Network of People who Use Drugs to support community advisory groups and clean ups

- **PRESENTATION:** TB HIV Care presents at World AIDS Day in Amsterdam

## 2017

- **POLICY INPUT:** TB HIV Care involved in the revision of the National Strategic Plan on HIV, TB and STIs (2017 – 2022) and advocates for the inclusion of harm reduction and related services for people who use drugs
- **LAUNCH:** Launch of the first low-threshold OST programme in South Africa in partnership with the Urban Futures Centre at Durban University of Technology
- **EXPANSION:** Needle and syringe and harm reduction services expand to include Port Elizabeth following a mapping, size estimation and community engagement process
- **DROP-IN CENTRES:** Establishment of Drop-In-Centres for people who use drugs in Cape Town and Durban
- **WORKSHOPS:** At 8th South African AIDS Conference, TB HIV Care co-hosts several skills-building sessions that include harm reduction, around engaging with police and another on HIV and viral hepatitis
- **TRAINING:** Three TB HIV Care staff attend African partners train-the-trainer harm reduction workshop facilitated by Mainline in Cape Town
- **STUDY:** TB HIV Care leads a consortium of partners in the most extensive study of viral hepatitis among people who use drugs and other key populations in South Africa
- **CONFERENCE:** SA Drug Policy Week 2017 brings together more than 150 stakeholders from 11 countries, and the South African Network of People Who Use Drugs is formed
- **REPORTS:** Release of three reports – “Conversations with Law Enforcement” “I am also Human: Human Rights Violations” and “Every single person looks at us bad”
- **WORKSHOP:** Mainline conducts Drop-in Centre mapping workshops to improve service uptake and quality

- **PRESENTATION:** The progress on harm reduction is presented in Montreal at the Harm Reduction Conference

## 2018

- **PSYCHOSOCIAL SERVICES:** The provision of ongoing psychosocial services as a parallel and essential adjunct to biomedical services
- **TRAINING:** Mainline supports the second cohort of trainers to attend a train-the-trainer workshop in Kenya
- **PRESENTATION:** Progress of harm reduction services of TB HIV Care and partners presented at 22nd International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam
- **STUDY RESULTS DISSEMINATION:** TB HIV Care collaborates with National and Provincial Departments of Health to host a series of World Hepatitis Day events, highlighting findings from hepatitis study among people who use drugs
- **CONFERENCE:** The largest SA Drug Policy Week held, with development of Durban demands, and a plenary presentation by Mainline
- **SUSPENSION:** Needle and syringe service stopped by eThekweni (Durban) Municipality on 9th May
- **DROP-IN CENTRE:** The Cape Town PWUD (People Who Use Drugs) Drop-In Centre moves to Woodstock site
- **POLICY INPUT:** TB HIV Care provides inputs around people who use drugs into the South Africa National Human Rights Plan
- **PRESENTATIONS:** Presentations on harm reduction and gaps presented at the Southern African HIV Clinicians Society Conference
- **ADVOCACY:** A Support Don't Punish March held in Durban, including a letter submitted to the Mayor requesting the reinstatement of the needle and syringe service
- **POLICY INPUT:** TB HIV Care engaged in Global Fund Country Concept note development process
- **APPOINTMENT:** Shaun Shelly, TB HIV Care PWUD Advocacy Manager, appointed as Deputy Secretary for the United Nations Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs
- **PRESENTATION:** For the first time harm reduction is presented at the African Science Forum
- **PUBLICATION:** A chapter on TB HIV Care's work using Contemplation groups included in Mainline's “Speed Limits: harm reduction for people who use stimulants” report

## 2019

- **CONFERENCE:** A TB HIV Care delegation attends 26th Harm Reduction International Conference in Porto, TB HIV Care co-hosts the Hepatitis C Satellite Symposium, presents two posters and

facilitates a discussion forum on halting the needle and syringe service in Durban

- **GLOBAL POLICY INPUT:** The annual Plenary of the Global Commission on Drug Policy in Lisbon
- **POLICY INPUT:** TB HIV Care co-leads the development of Harm Reduction Guidelines for the Southern African HIV Clinicians Society
- **POLICY INPUT:** TB HIV Care co-submits motivation for methadone to be placed on the Essential Medicines List for OST at Primary care level
- **POLICY INPUT:** TB HIV Care provides input into National Department of Health Policy (Hepatitis Action Plan, Hepatitis Management Guidelines, National OST Guidelines, National OST Plan, a draft National Needle and Syringe Policy and National HIV Prevention Strategy)
- **POLICY INPUT:** TB HIV Care representative participates in a workshop at African Union's 3rd Specialised technical committee on Health, Population and Drug Control to develop the African Civil Society Common Position on Drugs
- **TRAINING:** Mainline supports the third cohort of TB HIV Care psychosocial staff members to join a harm reduction train-the-trainer workshop in Thailand
- **PUBLICATION:** The publication of PWUD community member authored chapter “Towards a policy of harm reduction” published in Opioids in South Africa
- **CONFERENCE:** At 9th South African AIDS Conference: TB HIV Care facilitates a skills building session around the integration of HIV, hepatitis and harm reduction services. Supports the launch of a needs assessment of women who use drugs in four cities in South Africa report. Makes an oral presentation on the halting of Durban's Needle and Syringe service, and two posters on initial outcomes of OST pilot projects. Joins a high level round table meeting for resumption of needle and syringe service. Presents in main plenary on stigma towards people who use drugs
- **PRESENTATION:** TB HIV Care presents on harm reduction at the South African Science Forum
- **PRESENTATION:** TB HIV Care presents on harm reduction at the 10th IAS Conference on HIV Science in Mexico City; and at the 20th ICASA Conference in Kigali
- **SYMPOSIUM:** TB Care co-plans a harm reduction symposium in partnership with the University of Cape Town's Department of Psychiatry
- **POLICY INPUT:** Representatives of TB HIV Care nominated to be part of the South African National AIDS Council's technical working group to develop a South African National HIV Plan for People Who Use Drugs

“ We were delivering psychosocial services on an outreach basis, it was the first of its kind.”

TB HIV Care National Harm reduction project manager.



## RESULTS

- **STUDY:** TB HIV Care conducts an assessment of stimulant use in three cities, and distributes stimulant harm reduction packs
- **SAFE SPACES:** TB HIV Care establishes safe spaces for women who use drugs, and increase distribution of feminine hygiene products
- **WORKSHOP:** TB HIV Care co-hosts a workshop on viral hepatitis for people who use drugs communities and service providers in partnership with GNP+ in Cape Town
- **SITE VISIT:** Cape Town runner up to host the 2020 International Harm Reduction Conference, with the South African Network of People who Use Drugs and TB HIV Care co-hosting a site visit by Harm Reduction International
- **PRESENTATION:** TB HIV Care representative co-presents on Contemplation group approach to stimulant harm reduction at Brazilian Harm Reduction Conference
- **PRESENTATION:** TB HIV Care's CEO presents on harm reduction at the 50th Union World Conference on Lung Health in Hyderabad

### 2020

- **DELEGATION VISIT:** TB HIV Care co-hosts a delegation from Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion from the U.S.
- **APPOINTMENT:** CEO of TB HIV Care and several other staff members elected to lead the Civil Society sector for the Western Cape Provincial Council for AIDS
- **CONFERENCE:** TB HIV Care was the local convening organisation for the 1st regional conference on hepatitis care among substance users (INHSU Africa 2020)
- **TRAINING:** Mainline facilitates harm reduction training for new partners, and training around stimulant use in two cities
- **APPOINTMENT:** TB HIV Care representative presents the African Civil Society Common Position on Drugs at the 63rd Session of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs
- **PRESENTATION:** TB HIV Care representative speaks on Cannabis Laws and Harm Reduction in Africa at the End The War on Drugs webinar
- **SERVICES:** Needle and syringe services initiated in Pietermaritzburg
- **COVID-19 RESPONSE:** As part of the COVID-19 pandemic response, TB HIV Care works with partners to provide support for withdrawal management, access to OST, harm reduction services, shelter and food
- **RESUMPTION OF SERVICE:** Provisional authorisation to recommence needle and syringe services in Durban (April)

“ Having an organisation that supports us through several interventions, really helps us as we are often left feeling that no one cares for us, but you do. We really appreciate it, thank you.”

– client at first outreach in Pietermaritzburg

All photographs: Conor Ashleigh

### Enhanced health and well-being

> 5000 People reached by the needle and syringe programme

98 097 Health contacts with people who inject drugs

1 730 699

Needles and syringes distributed

129 People initiated onto OST

561 Staff harm reduction training contacts



73 048 One-on-one behaviour change interventions

625 People engaged in stimulant harm reduction interventions

84 Community advisory group sessions

2 853 One-on-one psychosocial services

86 Group sessions for women who use drugs

172 People supported to access mental health services



5 323 HIV tests and TB screenings done with PWUD



1 385 Human Rights violations recorded



### Awareness & shifting perspectives

8 Peer reviewed publications

16 Harm reduction policy briefs, book chapters, and reports

36 Presentations at scientific conferences

11 Posters at scientific conferences



57 Radio interviews

13 TV interviews

82 Press articles and quotes



1. UCSF, Anova Health Institute, NICD (2018) TipVal Study: Surveillance Survey among PWID. San Francisco: UCSF  
2. Scheibe et al. (2020) Retention and changes in MMT programme in Durban, South Africa. *Addict Sci Clin Pract* 15:1–11

3. Marks et al. (2020) High retention on OST in Durban: best practice and social cohesion. *Harm Reduct J* 17:1–14  
4. Versfeld A et al. (2018) Empathic response and no need for perfection. *Crit Public Health* 1596:1–11  
5. Versfeld et al. (2020) Motivations, facilitators and

barriers to HCV treatment among PWID. *Harm Reduct. J.* Forthcoming.

6. Scheibe et al (2020) Prohibitionist Drug Policy in South Africa—Reasons and Effects. *Int. Dev. Policy* Forthcoming.