

Alabama eHealth

Providing Essential HIV Medical and Other Services via Telemedicine to Address Health Disparities in Alabama

94% OF PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS ARE RETAINED IN CARE



Background

The stages of HIV care, also known as the HIV care continuum, demonstrate significant gaps in HIV services, and efforts are underway at the federal, state, and local levels to develop and implement strategies to improve health outcomes for people living with HIV (PLWH). The HIV care continuum can be described by the following sequential steps: (1) diagnosis of HIV infection, (2) linkage to care, (3) retention in care, (4) receipt of antiretroviral therapy (ART), and (5) achievement of viral suppression (a very low level of HIV in the body). In the United States, there are 1.2 million people living with HIV, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 66% have been linked to HIV-specific medical care.¹ Engagement in care is a critical step in ensuring access to highly effective HIV treatment, which can ultimately lead to viral suppression. Viral suppression results in significantly improved health outcomes as well as dramatically decreased likelihood of HIV transmission (96% reduced risk of transmission).² According to the CDC, 30% of people living with HIV had achieved viral suppression, which means that only 3 out of 10 people living with HIV had the virus under control. Barriers to engagement in care include lack of stable housing, poverty, mental health and substance use issues, lack of access to culturally competent care, transportation, and other competing needs; interventions to engage people in HIV care must address these needs at the point of engagement in care as well as in subsequent support for retention in care. Improvements along the HIV continuum of care hold great promise for both treatment as well as prevention.



What Are We Doing?

Faced with the confluence of Alabama's rapidly increasing need for HIV/AIDS care and the state's anemic current health care infrastructure, Medical Aids Outreach (MAO) of Alabama turned to technology as a means of leveling the playing field. In 2011, MAO established the Alabama eHealth program to deliver high-quality care in underserved and disproportionately impacted communities in rural portions of the state. Specifically targeting areas that serve as epicenters of HIV/AIDS incidence, MAO has leveraged telemedicine technology against rurality and poverty-driven barriers to accessing HIV care, ultimately empowering Alabama's rural residents to access the quality care that they deserve in the communities where they live. Telemedicine is an innovative and effective means of addressing barriers to care and harnessing technology to bridge gaps in HIV primary care in rural Alabama. Alabama eHealth reduces health disparities through the use of high-speed Internet, the latest Bluetooth medical technology,

UNIQUE FEATURES OF ALABAMA eHEALTH

- ▶ Increasing linkage to care by providing access to care for **rural areas** where there is no alternative.
- ▶ Increasing retention in care by providing state-of-the-art HIV primary care with compassion in rural Alabama—**94%** of participants in the program are retained in **HIV medical care**.
- ▶ Increasing access to **ancillary services** such as mental health counseling and pharmacy consultations.
- ▶ Ongoing clinical support to the patients to achieve viral suppression, meaning patients have a very low level of HIV in their blood. Patients who are virally suppressed are more likely to lead **healthier, longer lives** and less likely to transmit HIV to others.

¹"HIV/AIDS Care Continuum." AIDS.gov. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 6 Mar. 2015. Web. 11 May 2015.

²"Prevention Benefits of HIV Treatment." Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2013. Web. 11 May 2015.

and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act-compliant encryption to deliver quality care in real-time from a distance. It is a telemedicine-based venture that encompasses delivery of HIV primary care, social support services and education.

CLIENT STORY

“George” has been living with HIV for ten years, and was engaged in care intermittently throughout this time because of lack of access to necessary services: the rural clinic he was attending operated only once per month. He did not have health insurance and, as a result, could only pick up his medications at MAO’s site on a specific day of the week, posing a significant barrier to accessing medication. Taking medications daily and as prescribed is critical to ensuring HIV does not multiply and skipping medications can lead to drug resistance. He was enrolled in the Alabama eHealth program, which immediately made care more accessible and convenient. MAO also assisted in enrolling George in health insurance coverage, and he now regularly gets the medications needed to get him closer to viral suppression. Recently he had pain in his ear, and was able to be examined through telemedicine, where he was able to see his own ears on the screen. George feels in control of his HIV and is committed to preserving his health, thanks to the ease and accessibility of our telemedicine program.*

**George is a pseudonym for a client at Medical AIDS Outreach of Alabama, Inc.*

Initial Trends of Alabama eHealth

Though there was initial apprehension among providers and clients about this new technology, MAO quickly saw apprehension disappear as clients and providers realized the great quality of care that could be achieved through telemedicine for those out of and lost to care. Through Alabama eHealth, MAO has helped to reduce stigma by providing access in neutral clinic locations and by intentionally selecting a clinic name that is not specific to HIV. Client satisfaction is excellent — 94% of participants in the program are retained in HIV medical care!

Agency Overview

Medical AIDS Outreach of Alabama, Inc. (MAO), founded in 1987, provides community prevention education, quality services and compassionate care to those infected and/or affected by HIV/AIDS. We take a holistic approach to treatment, with the goal of eliminating barriers in order to link and retain individuals in a continuum of care. Our services include: social services, medical treatment, medication assistance, pharmaceutical consultations, mental health counseling, patient education, HIV testing, food bank services, Spanish-English translation and interpretation services for the hearing impaired.



PROGRAM CONTACT

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