

## BUILDING A WINNING TEAM TO PROMOTE ART ADHERENCE AND COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING AMONG YOUTH LIVING WITH HIV

Nearly 2 million adolescents globally are living with HIV: over 60% of them are girls and young women (ages 10-24), and 80% of them live in sub-Saharan Africa. Compared to children and older adults, youth living with HIV (YLHIV) have poorer adherence to antiretroviral therapy (ART) and higher rates of treatment failure. YLHIV face the complexities of adolescence and young adulthood, a dynamic period of change and development for all young people, while also managing a chronic disease and navigating transition to autonomous care. HIV services often lack youth-friendly care and integrated mental health and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information and services that YLHIV need and desire, making good adherence to ART difficult.



Combined with the power of soccer and play-based learning, Grassroot Soccer (GRS) is working to change the game for YLHIV. The GRS approach considers adolescent development, the challenging transition to autonomous care, and the complex influences and structural factors impacting YLHIV. At the core of GRS's approach are community-based mentor COACHES, who are openly living with HIV and focus on building the health and life skills ASSETS of YLHIV, including their SRHR knowledge and self-confidence to use it, facilitate ACCESS to a wide-range of youth-friendly health and social services beyond required HIV treatment and care, and promote ADHERENCE to biomedical treatment and long-term healthy behaviors. Given YLHIV's existing vulnerabilities, in response to COVID-19 and heightened barriers to YLHIV accessing essential services due to the pandemic, GRS adapted our methodology and "3A's" impact model to provide life-saving COVID-19 information along with sustained SRHR and psychosocial support for YLHIV.

Since 2012, over 10,600 YLHIV have benefited from GRS programs tailored to their unique needs across four countries in Southern Africa: Malawi, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

### DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR WORKING WITH YOUTH LIVING WITH HIV

Grassroot Soccer's approach to working with Youth Living with HIV emphasizes six principles:

**MENTORS LIVING WITH HIV FACILITATE PROGRAMS & NAVIGATE TREATMENT JOURNEY**



**SKILLZ Plus Coaches** are openly living with HIV, and act as relatable role models for YLHIV. They deliver youth-friendly health programs, share personal experiences, provide accompanied referrals, and help navigate the journey to autonomous care.

**BUILD A TEAM OF TREATMENT SUPPORTERS**



**SKILLZ Plus** builds the individual assets of YLHIV participants, and creates a strong peer network that encourages adherence, builds a sense of collective agency, and provides social support.

**BRIDGE HOME AND CLINIC EXPERIENCE BY ENGAGING FAMILY MEMBERS**



**SKILLZ Plus Coaches** conduct home visits to engage families and caretakers of YLHIV, and assist in facilitating disclosure from youth to parent or parent to youth. Coaches help overcome barriers to building an enabling family environment for YLHIV.

**EXPAND ACCESS TO SRHR AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES**



Trained in case management, GRS Care Coordinators are social workers who connect participants with a range of health services, track their evolving needs, and offer psychosocial support.

**DEVELOP EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AND PATHWAYS**



GRS prepares YLHIV for employment through leadership development, resume writing, computer literacy, and goal-setting, with a focus on strengthening future orientation.

**MAINTAIN STRATEGIC CLINICAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH MOH AND OTHERS**



GRS strengthens relationships with clinical partners including public and private sector facilities, which allows GRS to reach more YLHIV through referrals from clinical staff, as well as work with providers to improve the quality of youth-friendly services.

# PROGRAM AREAS

## PROGRAM AREA 1: SUPPORTING ADHERENCE AND HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

GRS uses a flexible club model to build the health and social assets of YLHIV, facilitate access to services, and support sustained adherence. Our age-segmented models for YLHIV address the unique stages of early adolescence (ages 9-14), late adolescence (ages 15-19), and the transition to adulthood (ages 17-24).

### SKILLZ Plus:

Designed in Zambia in 2012 and since expanded to South Africa and Zimbabwe, SKILLZ Plus includes twelve 60-minute 'practices' supplemented with ongoing SKILLZ Clubs to enhance peer support for adherence. HIV-positive Coaches help provide a platform for YLHIV to build skills on adherence and disclosure in a safe space. YLHIV are introduced to topics including HIV prevention and transmission, U=U, ART adherence, acceptance, disclosure, healthy relationships, mental health, drugs/alcohol, and balanced nutrition. YLHIV also have an opportunity to build their social support network with fellow participants—a key factor impacting long-term adherence.

### Transition Training (T2):

Created in response to feedback from participants in the Baylor Pediatric AIDS Initiative's Teen Clubs in Malawi, T2 integrates SKILLZ methodology to build employability and self-care skills, improve access to medical and non-medical resources, and increase adherence to medical treatment of YLHIV aged 17-24 years transitioning to adult clinical care. T2 was initially implemented at the Baylor College of Medicine Clinical Centre of Excellence in Lilongwe before a rural pilot at Salima District Hospital in 2018.



**"SKILLZ Plus has made me understand that having HIV is not the end of life. My coach encouraged me in a way that made me know that HIV is just a condition and it was just a matter of adhering to medication and the doctor's advice."**

**– SKILLZ PLUS PARTICIPANT, ZAMBIA**



## PROGRAM AREA 2: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS FOR DIFFERENTIATED SUPPORT

GRS maintains strategic partnerships with clinical service providers and local organizations to deliver differentiated, decentralized, youth-centered models of treatment, care, and support for YLHIV. This ensures that our YLHIV programs are adaptable to the countries and contexts (urban, peri-urban, and rural areas) where we work. For instance, GRS partners with AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) in South Africa to implement SKILLZ Plus via an AHF clinic and offsite weekend "camps." In Zimbabwe, GRS works with the Ministry of Health and Child Care and Bulawayo City Health to deliver SKILLZ Plus in over 43 local health clinics across three provinces.



# PROGRAM AREAS

Through community mobilization, completed referrals, and community-based follow-up, Coaches serve as youth navigators who facilitate bi-directional community-facility linkages to services. Vulnerability and risk-screening conducted by Coaches ensures that YLHIV receive tailored case management support and layered services that meet their unique needs.

## **Working with the Eastern Province Provincial Health Office (EPHO) to Decentralize SKILLZ Plus in Zambia:**

The EPHO under the Zambian Ministry of Health (MOH) supports GRS Zambia to work with local organizations and clinics to decentralize SKILLZ Plus interventions and support groups through the Network of People Living with HIV, Health Centre Committees, and Neighborhood Health Committees. Key to SKILLZ Plus sustainability across Zambia have been these relationships, including long-standing MOH support: over 90% of SKILLZ Plus participants are referred directly from MOH facilities.



"GRS SKILLZ Plus Support Group and Camps assisted me in understanding the importance of accepting that I am HIV-positive...I also received counselling and discovered that I am not alone and that there are other children who are HIV-positive. When I first started attending SKILLZ Plus, my viral load was high because I was skipping my medication, but I learned the dangers I was exposing myself to. I also learned the names and ingredients that make up my pill...If for some reason I encounter a problem of not having my medication, I will know the names when going to a clinic."

– SKILLZ PLUS PARTICIPANT AT AHF CLINIC, SOUTH AFRICA

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## PROGRAM AREA 3: PROMOTING COMPREHENSIVE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

GRS focuses on building the assets and skills that young people need to thrive in adolescence and into adulthood. GRS promotes the development of interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, and drug and alcohol education to support adolescent mental health. During 2020 updates to the SKILLZ Plus curriculum, GRS specifically included additional modules on mental health and coping skills, given the increased vulnerability of YLHIV to poor mental health and psychosocial outcomes.

### **Community-based Mental Health Treatment for YLHIV:**

Recognizing the need for mental health services as a part of comprehensive care for YLHIV, GRS began partnering with StrongMinds Zambia (SMZ) in 2020 to address depression through Interpersonal Group Therapy (IPT-G). Over three years, GRS and SMZ aim to reach 4,500 YLHIV integrating community-based mental health treatment with adherence support through SKILLZ Plus.



"As an HIV-positive youth who has suffered from depression it was really hard to get help for my mental health problems because everyone was focused on my HIV status...Everything is intertwined, and everything has an effect on young people living with HIV. For so long, the approach has been to talk more about the HIV aspect of our lives and automatically expect every other part of our lives to fall into place once we are virally suppressed."

– GRS ZAMBIA TRAINING FELLOW & FORMER COACH

## **Bridging the Gap:**

Results from the 2013-2014 pilot evaluation demonstrated participants' increased uptake of HTS and successful linkage to ART: 100% of participants testing positive received their results, and 85% stayed on ART at follow-up. A 2017 programmatic evaluation in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa highlighted the importance and impact of home visits by SKILLZ Plus Coaches on supporting caregivers' disclosure to YLHIV.

## **Transition Training (T2) Program Evaluation:**

Data suggested T2 participants had improved viral load compared to peers who did not participate. Further investigation with a larger sample size and consistent clinical data collection is required to confirm this preliminary finding.

## **Total Health Evaluation Baseline:**

GRS is conducting a longitudinal cohort study of adolescents who will undergo multiple SKILLZ interventions. Baseline findings indicate that YLHIV attending SKILLZ Plus in Zimbabwe and Zambia reported strong adherence: 95% of adolescents surveyed in health facilities in Zambia said that they follow ART as directed, while 100% of SKILLZ Plus participants reported adhering to ART in Zimbabwe.

## **Design and Pilot of Self-Report ART Adherence Tool:**

In response to the challenges faced collecting clinical CD4 and viral load data in resource-limited settings, in 2019 GRS designed a self-reported adherence tool, now being piloted with 484 SKILLZ Plus participants in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. At baseline, 73% of participants reported good adherence, which compares well with self-reported adherence in a review of 16 studies in Africa (range 62-84% adherence). Baseline findings demonstrated a statistically significant association between survey items on social behavior, belief in treatment efficacy, and past-month adherence. Results will be compared with participants' clinical data, expected in late 2020.



## **ABOUT US**

Grassroot Soccer is an adolescent health organization that leverages the power of soccer to educate, inspire, and mobilize at-risk youth in developing countries to overcome their greatest health challenges, live healthier, more productive lives, and be agents for change in their communities. Grassroot Soccer has implemented health programs for 2.7 million adolescents in 62 countries.

## **CONTACT**

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