

## FACING STIGMA HEAD ON, WITH A BRAVE AND DETERMINED HEART



*Sibusiso committed to sharing his challenging experiences with health care workers in accessing health care to help decrease the stigma and discrimination which creates a barrier to key populations in accessing HIV prevention services*

*"I am a young gay man in Swaziland – I only have sex with other men. I was born like this and it's not a choice – I was created by God like this, just like you were."*

– Sibusiso Masango, a KaMhlaba Ambassador sensitizing health care workers (HCWs) at the Mbabane Government Hospital.

Former Swaziland King Sobhuza II once said *"We are KaMhalba,"* meaning *"We are all of one world,"* a statement of inclusion and compassion. But the Swaziland Behavioral Surveillance Survey has revealed that sex workers, gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM) routinely experience stigma and discrimination at health facilities, resulting in a lack of critical HIV preventative services. With HIV prevalence amongst MSM at 17.7 %, any barrier to services for them is a barrier to controlling HIV in Swaziland.

The Swaziland National AIDS Program (SNAP) in collaboration with the Health Communication Capacity Collaborative (HC3), funded by PEPFAR through USAID, are responding to the stigmatization of key populations (KP) with a time-tested approach to creating understanding and decreasing conflict through dialogue.

Sibusiso and two other representatives of MSM and sex worker populations are KaMhlaba Ambassadors. The Ambassadors conduct onsite dialogue and sensitization sessions for HCWs and nursing students with the aim of breaking down the discrimination barriers and resolutely pushing open the doors to HIV services for socially marginalized groups. In the three-hour dialogue sessions, Sibusiso and colleagues share their experiences in accessing health care services and suggest solutions for improving KP health care. The team has reached two major hospitals and a nursing university with a total of 119 HCWs sensitized.

"These sessions have also changed my behavior. I feel I should live as a role model now, as everyone that has listened to my presentations and other KP are looking up to me," said Sibusiso with inner strength, grace, humor and compassion as he explains to HCWs how being stigmatized results in an unwillingness by KP to seek treatment. "We are here to build better understanding with you and not to blame you. But most of us are afraid to come to clinics because of dehumanizing experiences. We are human and we want to be treated like any other client, that is all."

The sessions are transformative on both sides and Sibusiso is confident HCWs will change their behavior. Overwhelmingly, HCWs say they did not understand that they were stigmatizing and hurting others and they would like to learn more about KP issues.

"I really feel good about this work. These sessions have empowered me to be brave and to stand and talk on behalf of my community," Sibusiso says. "Very soon we will achieve our goal of eliminating stigma in facilities and have KPs going without fear."

Sibusiso says his attitude towards HCWs has also changed because of being a KaMhlaba Ambassador.



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