

THE IMPACT OF THE MACHAKOS YOUTH DROP-IN CENTRE ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING.

County:	Machakos County		
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Target Audience:	Counties Youth		
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Introduction

¹World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn, work and contribute to their community. It encompasses our emotional, psychological and social well-being and affects how we think, feel, and act. Despite frequent discussions on this subject across diverse social platforms, the translation of discourse into tangible

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

actions within family, workplace and governance contexts remains a challenge. This challenge affects individuals across all age groups and diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing societal issues, notably witnessing an increase in both Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and adolescent pregnancies across numerous Counties. Machakos County, located 39 miles from Nairobi with a resident population of 63,767 as of the 2019 census, recorded 4,000 cases of teenage pregnancies during the pandemic period. This substantial figure posed a significant threat to the mental well-being of numerous adolescents, leading to heightened risks of suicidal thoughts, abortion-seeking behavior and increased demand for counseling services.

Machakos County lacked a dedicated space for youth to convene, share experiences, and receive guidance from qualified psychiatrists and counselors. Moreover, many youths exhibited reluctance to visit hospital drop-in centers for HIV testing, expressing a preference for locations outside the hospital compound where such services could be accessed.



Machakos Youth Drop-In Centre

For GBV survivors, particularly those in early marriages, there was a lack of awareness regarding locations where they could seek help and counseling.

To tackle this challenge, the Machakos County Government, in collaboration with the Red Cross, has established a Youth Drop-In Centre within the Machakos Youth Centre. This facility provides counseling sessions, HIV testing, cancer screening and a range of structured conversation-oriented events, including coffee talks. The strategic placement of the Drop-In Centre within the Machakos Youth Centre aims to create an environment where young individuals can access a variety of services conveniently in one location.

The Machakos Youth Centre offers complimentary computer classes to students, with mandatory attendance at coffee talks, where youth engage in discussions on various topics affecting them. To support the mental health of the youth, the County has deployed two medical professionals, a doctor and a level 5 psychiatrist to provide free counseling sessions for those unable to afford such services.



Students attending a computer class in the Machakos Youth Centre

Further, the Youth Drop-In Centre is staffed with a social welfare officer who addresses GBV-related cases.

In response to the growing demand from both youth seeking counseling and the community at large, the County has taken a proactive step by establishing a GBV shelter. This Centre serves as a referral point for victims, offering additional care and protection alongside counseling services.



Pictures of the Machakos GBV Centre

Implementation of the practice

In 2018, the County government of Machakos collaborated with Red Cross to conduct a survey targeting youth in colleges and public areas.

The survey aimed to understand the youths' perspectives on their utilization of local hospital drop-in centers for HIV testing as well as their preferred locations and support networks for counseling when needed.

The insights gathered from the survey prompted the County to renovate a previously overlooked three-room office area. This revamped space now functions as a space for cancer screening, HIV testing, counseling and reception services within the Machakos Youth Centre.

In 2019, the County collaborated with Deaf Empowerment Kenya (DEK), known for evidence-based interventions in HIV prevention, to furnish the Centre with office chairs, cancer screening equipment, beds, and various materials, transforming it into a fully equipped facility.

Amid the COVID-19 lockdown, the County's efforts to initiate activities at the facility such as deploying officers were delayed. However, by October 2021, the Centre was officially launched with staff and resources fully in place, geared to address the rising issue of increased teenage pregnancies.

Following its launch in 2022, the Centre has been receiving over 15 daily visits, particularly during its weekly Thursday coffee talks. ²In the last year, the facility has provided services to over 2000 youth in Machakos County.



A picture of an ongoing coffee talk

The Machakos County Youth Drop-In Centre operates within a monthly budget ranging from Ksh5,000 to Ksh10,000 allocated for the purchase of coffee, sugar and biscuits specifically for the coffee talk sessions.

The Center has introduced games such as darts, pool and card games, providing a covert opportunity for teenagers to discreetly undergo HIV testing while engaging in play without others being aware.

To ensure continuous discussions on mental health, the facility conducts frequent Facebook Live sessions, especially during public holidays and weekends. These sessions

² Data provided by the site coordinator and counselor Mr Alex Mavuti

cover a wide range of subjects, including mental health issues and financial empowerment hence encouraging open and informative conversations.

The sustainability of the center is guaranteed through the County's CIDP, which focuses on empowering the Machakos Youth Center

Results of the practice

1. Increased HIV testing rates by 35% among teenagers through discreet gaming opportunities.
2. Regular engagement in mental health discussions, both in-person and via online sessions has fostered awareness and open dialogues.
3. The cancer screening facility has facilitated early detection of cervical cancer signs among teenage girls.
4. Under the supervision of the Social Welfare County Officer, teenagers facing GBV cases receive comprehensive care, including hospital referrals and protection measures.
5. The Thursday coffee talks have been instrumental in raising awareness among a larger number of youths about the presence and purpose of the facility.

Lessons learnt:

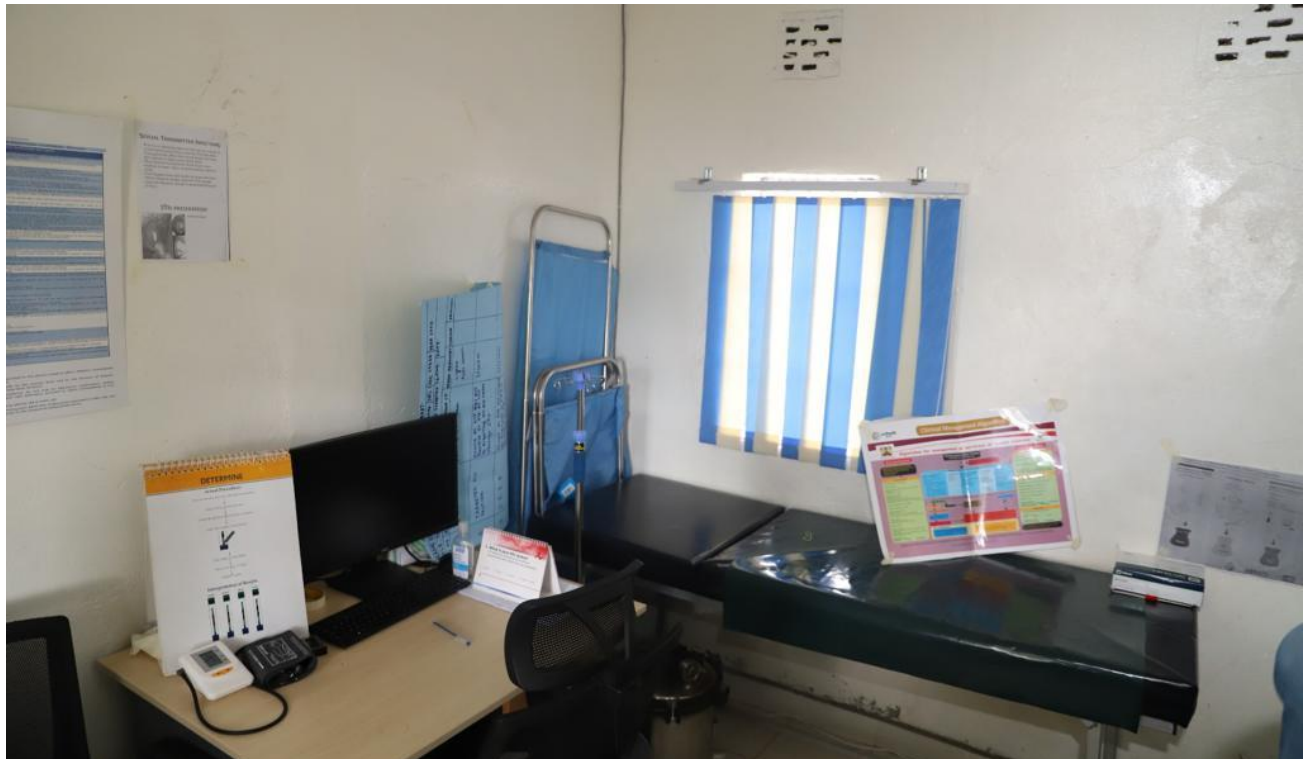
1. Innovative Approaches: Creative strategies, such as using games as a means for discreet HIV testing have proven effective in engaging and encouraging participation especially among teenagers.
2. Community Engagement: Regular discussions, both in-person and through online platforms, have been crucial in promoting mental health awareness and addressing various concerns among the youth.
3. Multi-Purpose Centres: Creating multifunctional spaces that cater to diverse needs, such as combining cancer screening, counseling services and community engagement activities, has shown the effectiveness and importance of such integrated centres.

4. Collaborative Partnerships: Collaborating with external organizations, like Deaf Empowerment Kenya and the Red Cross, has been essential in enhancing the Centre's impact and sustainability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the initiatives undertaken by Machakos County, in collaboration with various organizations, have yielded substantial and positive results. These efforts have significantly impacted the community by facilitating early cancer detection, empowering teenagers to openly address their concerns and providing comprehensive care for those affected by gender-based violence. The consistent engagement through activities like the Thursday coffee talks has notably increased awareness and participation among the youth, contributing to the success and sustainability of the Centre.

Photos





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