



World AIDS Day 2024

Statement from Senator Dr. the Most Honourable Jerome Walcott, Minister of Health and Wellness



As we commemorate World AIDS Day along with other countries both regionally and internationally, we embrace this opportunity to raise awareness of HIV and support those living with the disease. Since the detection of the first case in Barbados in 1984 and the end of December 2023, 4,841 persons have been diagnosed with HIV. Of these, 64% were male, and 36%

female. Males also account for the majority of persons diagnosed with advanced disease (67% of AIDS cases) in this country. In 2023, 132 persons were newly diagnosed with HIV and there were 2, 635 persons living with HIV at the end of 2023.

This year's World AIDS Day theme "Take the *rights* path" reminds us of the importance of human rights in the HIV response. It is recognised that one of the fundamental rights that exists is health as human right. Everyone should have access to the health services they need, including HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services, at the time that they need them and where they need them. Since 2001, the government of Barbados has ensured that persons with HIV have access to life saving antiretroviral drugs. As a result, HIV has become a manageable chronic illness with reduced morbidity and significantly reduced mortality which is reflected in the reduction of deaths noted in recent years compared with the early days of the response. Within the last decade the annual number of reported deaths amongst persons living with HIV has remained below 60, compared to the highest figures of 120 reported in 1998.

There are a myriad of inter-related social factors which predispose persons to being vulnerable to HIV and for those living with the disease many of these same factors could adversely impact their overall health and wellness especially when they are not accessing requisite care. Protecting human rights means ensuring that healthcare is available to everyone, without any discrimination and regardless of HIV status, socioeconomic status, background, sexual orientation or gender. Stigma and discrimination can undermine efforts to address HIV.

Some of our actions to address access to populations affected by stigma have included partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Equals Inc. and BFPA (formerly known as the Barbados Family Planning Association) to expand the provision of key preventative and treatment services. Through

a process of shared care between the Ministry of Health and Wellness and these NGOs, persons are able to access pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) or antiretroviral agents to prevent HIV infection as well as combination therapy to treat existing infection. The national response therefore encompasses partners from a range of different sectors, community-based organisations and other Ministries which encourage persons to get tested, get on treatment, stay on treatment and live productive lives.

Within the Ministry of Health and Wellness, our efforts are centred on a fundamental paradigm known as the Continuum of HIV care, with HIV prevention, specifically HIV testing being the main entry point to this care pathway. While persons are tested for HIV, screening is also routinely performed for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis. It is important to remember that the presence of another STI can increase the risk of HIV transmission and that people with HIV who are also infected with another STI are more likely to transmit the virus through sexual contact.

As Barbados strives to achieve the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets, 95% of people living with HIV diagnosed; 95% of people diagnosed with HIV on anti-retroviral treatment and 95% of people on ART with suppressed viral load, we encourage all of you to partner with us as we seek to further address the stigma and discrimination which deters people from accessing health services, even at the community level. We also encourage all Barbadians to get tested for HIV, be screened for other STIs and know their status. At the end of 2023, 95% of the estimated persons living HIV were diagnosed; 58% of those diagnosed were on ART and 77% of ART patients had a suppressed viral load. As we aim for achievement of the 2025 and 2030 international targets and to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, including the vision of ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030, we must continue to enhance our strategic partnerships and emphasise human rights.

On this World AIDS Day, I call on our stakeholders and all Barbadians to join us in taking the rights path. Let us work together to eliminate stigma and discrimination, ensure equal access to healthcare, and support those living with HIV. Through continued partnership, awareness, and commitment to human rights, we can move closer to our goal of ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. Let us join together to create a more inclusive, understanding, and healthier Barbados for all.

