

2023 SUMMARY

REPORT



ONLINE HOOKUPS COME WITH A LOT MORE THAN JUST A DATE
Get a FREE test for all STIs here
STAY SAFE WHEN USING HOOK-UP APPS

PrEP The pill that Pre-vents HIV
Gwe Miia PrEP wo. #OSILIKE

Do you know the difference between PrEP and PEP?
Before PrEP After PEP
PRE-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS POST-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS
PrEP helps prevent HIV infection
PEP is an emergency medication for patients after exposure

UNDETECTABLE = UNTRANSMITTABLE
LIVING WITH HIV WHO HAS AN UNDETECTABLE VIRAL LOAD CANNOT TRANSMIT HIV TO THEIR SEXUAL PARTNERS

Tele-medicine
Your doctor is just a phone call away

Ark
Wellness
Hub

INTRODUCTION:

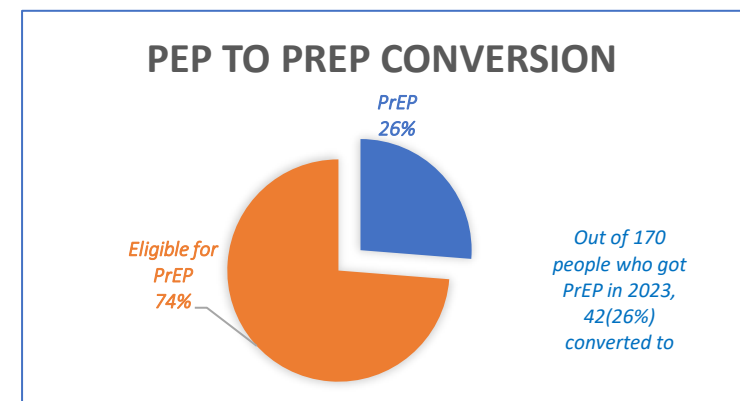
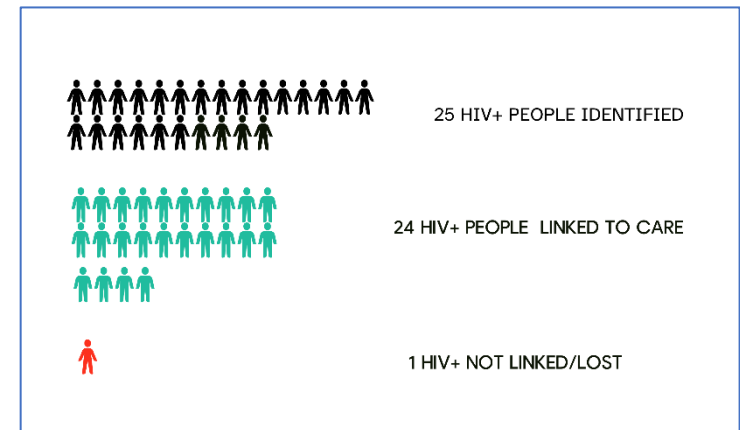
Ark Wellness Hub (AWH) is an LGBTQ led non-profit organization that registered in 2019 and started offering services in 2020. We dedicated to enhancing the sexual reproductive health, mental well-being, and overall primary healthcare of the LGBTQ community in Uganda because of the existing social stigma, continued criminalization, and violence towards our community in many spaces including public healthcare facilities. We deliver LGBTQ competent and culturally appropriate high-quality healthcare services, addressing both real and perceived fears that affect their access to health and wellness services.

We operate a daily and late evening clinic open from 9:00am to 8:00pm, including weekends and public holidays and provide a range of prevention, treatment and care services including PrEP, PEP, ART, Hepatitis B and HPV vaccination, STI treatment and management, Health Education, GBV and Mental Health services, harm reduction support and referral and other services.

Our workforce is entirely LGBTQ, this is to ensure that clients access informed and culturally appropriate services. We aim to be a center of excellence for LGBTQ health by collecting quantitative and qualitative data that informs programming and feeds LGBTQ rights advocacy efforts.

WHAT WE DID in 2023!

- Initiated 190 people on PrEP and conducted 950 refills.
- Provided 170 people with Emergency PEP and 42 of them converted to using PrEP as a prevention method.
- Identified 25 new HIV positive individuals and linked 24 to comprehensive HIV care and support – 11 out of 24 people have already achieved viral suppression.
- Provided 303 ART refills to 38 clients currently managed at Ark Wellness Hub.
- 31 out of 38 currently managed at AWH have virally suppressed.
- Conducted 424 Tests and comprehensively treated 177 people with STIs.
- Provided Mental Health support to 173 people.
- Conducted 1,327 HTS for our clients.
- Received and managed 528 Online medical Consultations.
- Conducted 683 deliveries for PrEP and ART Refills, HIV self-Test Kits, Condoms, and lubricants.
- Identified 105 anal warts clients and treated 41 through cryotherapy.
- Conducted 40 referrals.

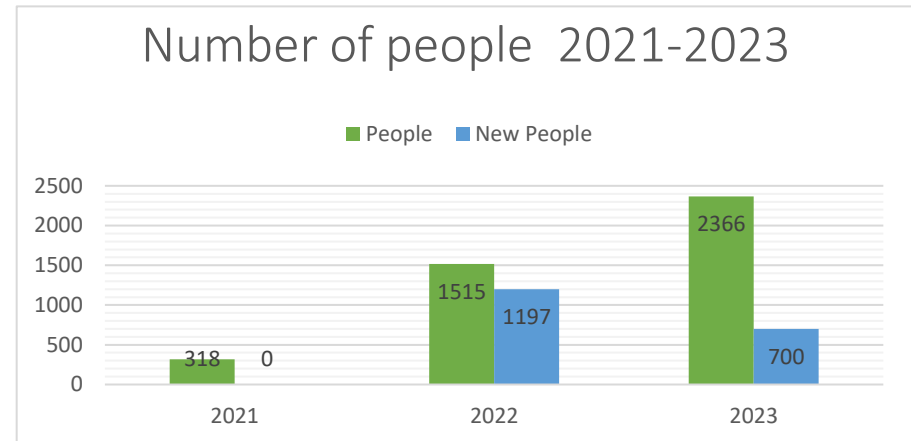
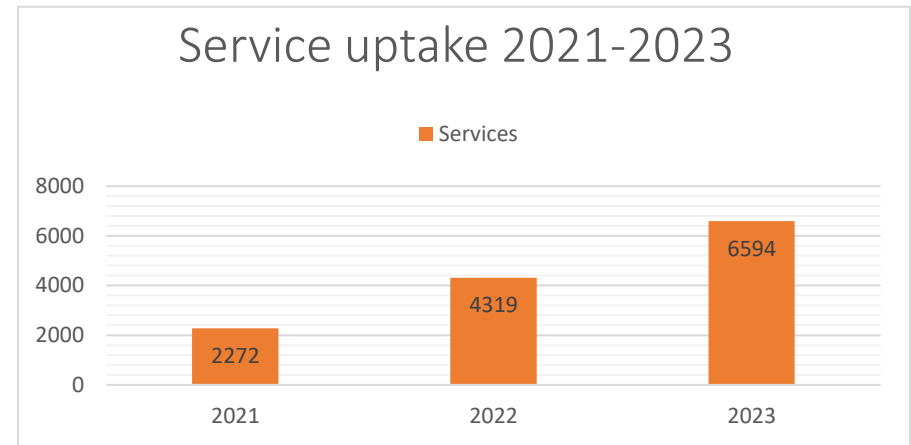
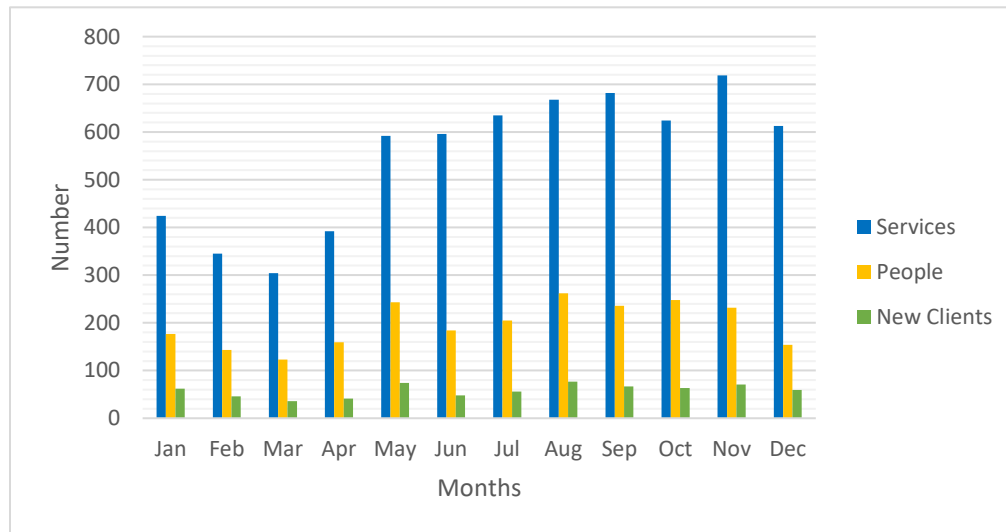


GENERAL SERVICE UTILIZATION

The Utilization of services grew from 4,319 in 2022 to 6,594 in 2023 and the number of people utilizing services grew from 1,515 to 2,366, respectively.

Despite the Anti Homosexuality Act of 2023 that threatened access to health and wellness services with tough sentences for LGBTQ individuals, service providers and LGBTQ organizations, we received 700 new clients.

Many clients were worried about their bio and medical data safety, most of them preferred to use digital means to access services through deliveries than walk ins.



Key Notes.

- In the build up to AHA between November 2022 to April, access to services had reduced because of the constant social media propaganda against LGBTQ organization that had subsequently led to the closure of SMUG and other Drop-in Centers. When AHA was signed, many people despite the fear continued to look for safer and trustable access to services – our decision to stay open led meant that we were the only safer option for many to get services since public facilities were required to report clients to the authorities.

Our 2023 service tracker shows the utilization of services and the trends affected by AHA and how our responses covered the gaps.



AWH SERVICE UTILIZATION TRACKER 2023

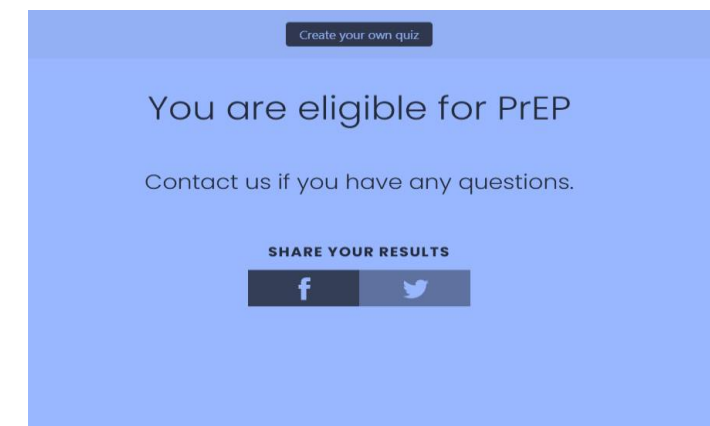
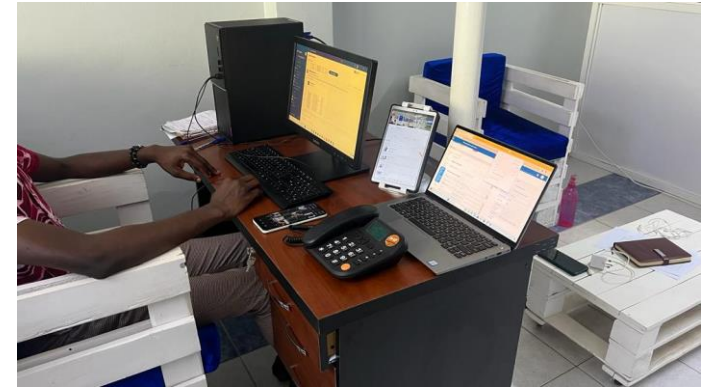
MONTH	STI mgt	Mental health	PrEP	PEP	ART	HTS	Condoms & Lubricants	TELEMEDICINE		Lab services	Proct exams	Referrals	TOTAL	N.O OF PEOPLE	NEW
								Online Consults	Home Delivery						
January	30	12	36	18	23	110	48	18	38	71	12	8	424	177	62
February	32	17	39	12	20	74	46	22	24	53	2	4	345	143	46
March	27	23	35	4	27	59	28	45	21	30	3	2	304	123	36
April	19	11	33	14	22	108	22	38	27	92	2	4	392	159	41
May	25	23	64	16	25	140	62	43	61	119	12	2	592	243	74
June	28	17	58	14	27	126	71	52	78	112	11	2	596	184	48
July	36	12	64	16	23	145	93	41	72	126	4	3	635	205	56
August	47	15	42	12	29	138	101	39	82	147	15	1	668	262	77
September	42	11	49	9	32	122	127	46	76	153	9	6	682	236	67
October	45	13	37	13	25	110	84	38	70	173	10	6	624	248	63
November	40	10	58	24	24	99	100	97	73	179	13	2	719	232	71
December	14	9	68	18	26	96	120	49	61	140	12	0	613	154	59
Annual TOTAL	385	173	583	170	303	1327	902	528	683	1395	105	40	6594	2366	700

- In April 2023 we revamped our Telehealth program that increased access to services for the communities. Remote enrolment on PrEP, deliveries of refills and samples collection from the community show that by the end of May, we had started reaching more people.
- Despite the reduction in repeat clients because of the law, we saw many new clients coming to seek services at the clinic. By the end of the year we had 700 new people who had never been to the clinic before.

the STRATEGY! *How we work.*

During this period, the following strategies (both new and old) were employed to reach our community.

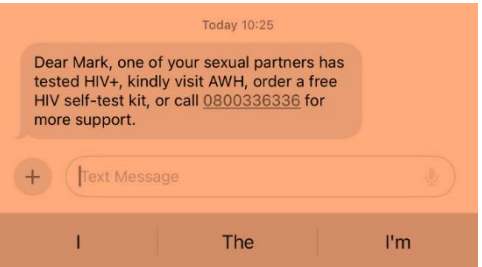
- **A Call center:** In April 2023, we hired a call center attendant, provided them with tools, i.e., a computer, Desk and Chair, 2 mobile phones, and a toll-free number to reach out and respond directly to all clients. The attendant is also in charge of managing home deliveries and online consultations. Our toll-free number 0800336336 facilitates the seamless contact between health workers and our clients with unlimited talk time and minimal financial restrictions for clients yet offering a safer way to access services addressing both real and perceived fears of accessing clinics as an LGBTQ person during this time.
- **Telemedicine and Delivery services:** Since 2020, we have continued to provide telemedicine and delivery services through WhatsApp 0200900083 and Toll free 0800336336, social media platforms, dating sites and other virtual platforms requesting or booking for services. The requests are then processed on our side by the team and the supplies such as PrEP and ART refills, condoms & lubricants, HIV self-test kits and other medicines are delivered to their homes or places of work using a SafeBoda. During this period, this strategy has benefited about 60% of the total number of clients served at AWH in the year.
- **Online PrEP Eligibility test and Remote enrollment:** We designed an online PrEP eligibility tool on the link <https://quiz.tryinteract.com/#/6225bbe6eaf56b001874b572> online where people remotely take a self-eligibility test for PrEP. The tool gives everyone a chance to have an honest self-evaluation of their sexual behaviors and vulnerability to HIV. For people who cannot walk into the clinic to undergo PrEP screening this tool helps and in turn they can seek PrEP services remotely through our checkpoint program where we pick their samples from clients in communities.



- PrEP Stickers:** The stigma around all HIV related medication continues to affect utilization of PrEP. Similar branding is a barrier for many young people who share spaces with friends and family. Being LGBTQ and carrying any HIV related medication doubles the stigma. PrEP stickers have helped our community differentiate PrEP from other HIV medications, reduced stigma and made it easy to have at home or in the presence of partners and families and has prevented violence among partners.



- Notification Message services:** this strategy has been instrumental in enabling early detection of HIV and STI cases as well as early enrollment in care to avoid severity through anonymously reaching out to sexual partners of clients who have tested positive for HIV and other STIs so they can come and carry out an HIV test or STI test. They are then followed up by the clinician in charge to make sure they test once every week. We use the same strategy to send automated reminders to clients who are on PrEP and ART reminding them of their refills when they are due, this has greatly helped us to maintain a very good adherence for our clients.

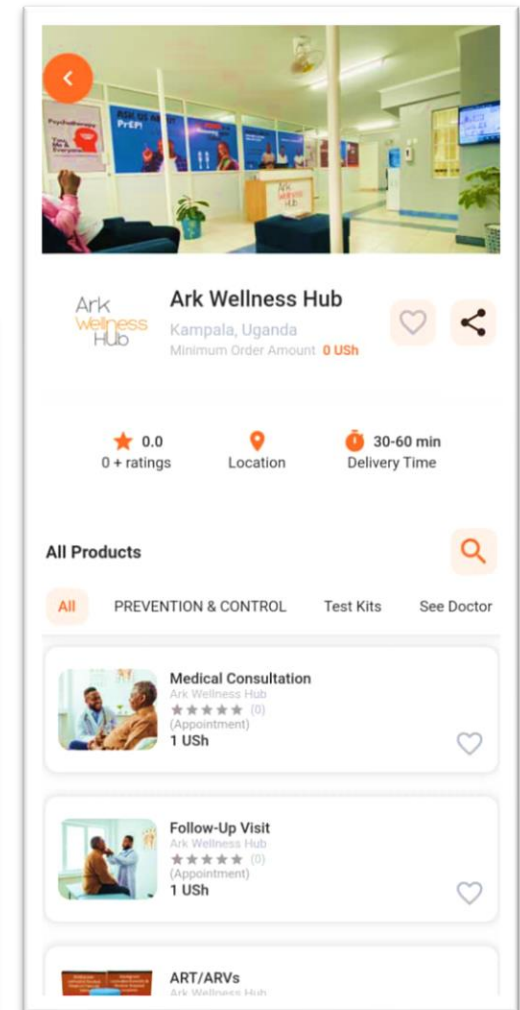
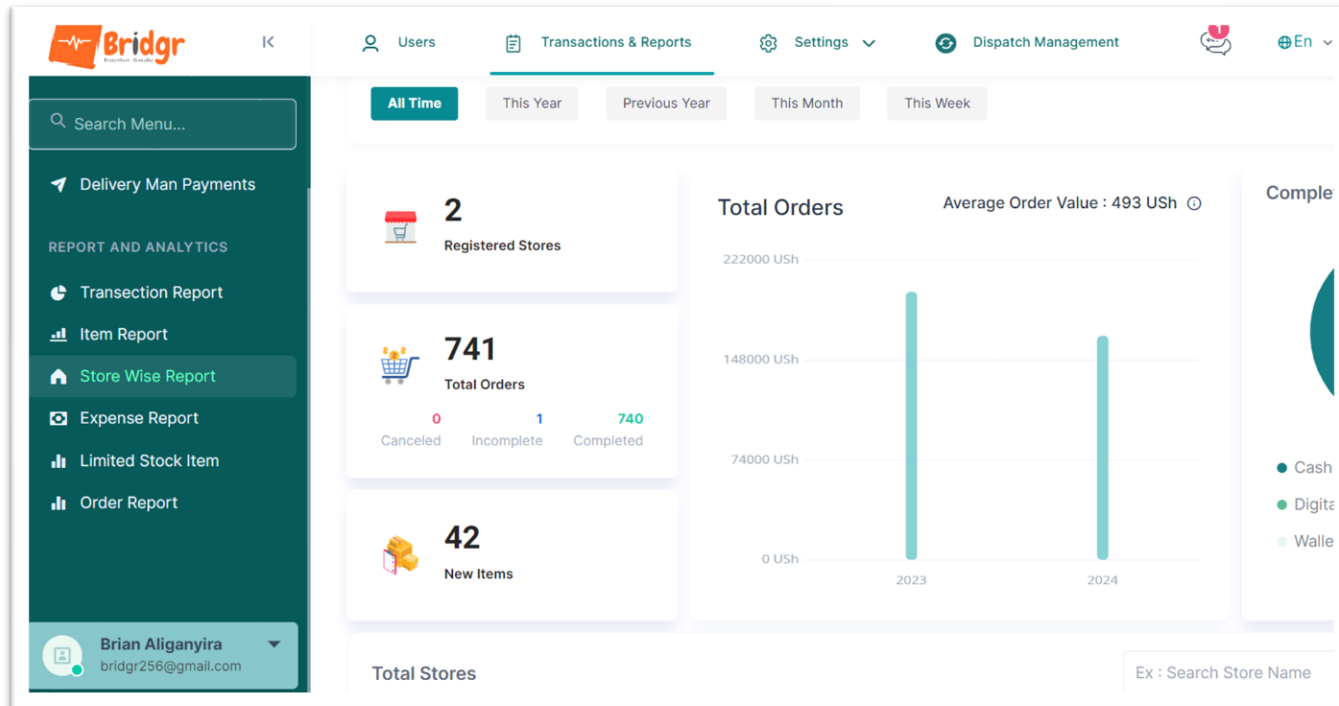


- Yamzit:** This is an online system we have been using since 2021 to manage clients' appointments and request refills, HIV testing and others. The Yamzit system has been useful during these times of increased stigma brought about by the passing of the AHA23 where people no longer want to gather in places where they could be attacked. Clients have continued to book appointments and we have been managing the walk-ins by assigning a given number of slots on given days and times to avoid overcrowding the clinic. By 23/Dec/2023 **5,479** services had been tracked through the platform.

- Social media & dating sites:** We placed peer educators on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tinder, Grindr & in WhatsApp groups to target people with information and where to find services. Social media has supported our continuous engagements with clients especially those who might be scared to openly identify as LGBTQ but require services. Since May 2023, this is the breakdown of people reached per platform.

Social Media Site - Since May 2023	No. People reached with information	No. of people given services	Comments
Grindr	67	19	Grindr has been used to extort people and others have been arrested and extorted by rogue police Officers and therefore the trust levels are low.
Instagram	89	33	Instagram provides a safer way to chat, call and proof of a person and who they associate with and therefore people are a bit free to express themselves therefore the yield is high.
Facebook	79	33	Facebook is blocked in Uganda; you must use a VPN to access it. However, there are a lot of people who still use it, and this explains the numbers.
Twitter	71	25	Twitter has a good expressive audience of LGBTQ people; however, many are closeted and use alias accounts. People access services mostly because they have been recommended
Snapchat	38	16	Snapchat is direct and because of the expiring media, and notification of screen recording people trust it more.
Tinder	44	12	Our account was blocked on tinder, but it is an avenue we want to continue exploring.
WhatsApp Groups	334	273	These are chat spaces and the substantial numbers in different groups have been responding to services.

- Bridgr Health App/Platform:** On November 22nd, 2023, we started piloting an online platform/online clinic that we have created to ease access to prevention, care and treatment products and services. Bridgr Health App simplifies access to services for clients anywhere and promotes confidentiality while at the clinic. For example, a client can request their own delivery through the mobile app and even book an appointment for when they can walk into the clinic. The app is available to other clinics to enroll and remotely support their clients anywhere with an independent interface. As of Feb 10th, 2024, we have received 741 orders for services. And will roll the app out on both Android and IOS. Access the application on play store. [Bridgr Health - Apps on Google Play](#)



- Alone Clinic Time:** To be able to reach all dynamics of people in our community we availed alone clinic times at the clinic -where a client can be seen alone at the clinic. This is alone in the evening hours or weekends and public holidays. This service is charged at the clinic at a fee of 50,000 Uganda Shs (\$13) for 30 mins.
- Sample Collection:** Through Telemedicine, we also conduct sample collection from the community. Our staff can travel to various locations within 20km of Kampala. The service remains free, but the client pays for the transport costs. The service is free for people who stay in shelters, and cases where the client is ill, a person living with disability, or student and other cases as may be determined.



OTHER THINGS WE DID!

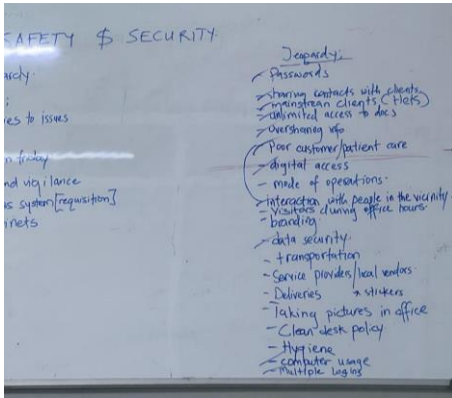
- **Provided Vaccines:**
 - ✓ We started providing free Hepatitis B vaccines to our community with support from Kiswa Health Center. To date we have 261 shots of HEB vaccines to 176 persons. Hep B vaccines are crucial for our communities to limit poor health outcomes, e.g., persons on starting PrEP are all screened and vaccinated against HEP B.
 - ✓ In November 2023 we started providing HPV vaccines too but at a cost, of 70,000shs (\$20). We have so far vaccinated eighteen people. The HPV vaccine is one of the most effective ways to prevent genital warts, and cancers even among Men who have sex with men and transgender women.
- **Supported Victims of Sexual Violence:** We started working with FRAUEN INNITIATIVE an organization linking victims of sexual violence to emergency services by providing them with emergency drugs like PEP, Rape Kits, and space for Psychosocial support, *FRAUEN Uganda can use Ark Wellness Hub space to provide psychosocial support services to their beneficiaries.*
- **Outreach Services to Shelters:** Since the start of 2023, we have continued to take our services closer to specific groups of people that might fail to access the clinic. Through UMSC (Uganda Minorities Shelters Consortium) we supported 6 shelters' occupants to access health and wellness services through quarterly HIV tests and screening for infectious Diseases like TB and providing treatment for STIs, Malaria and Typhoid and provided transport fare to some who could not afford commutes to the clinic but needed further closed-door support by a medical officer. In 2023, despite the security challenges shelters faced, many continued to receive higher numbers of people chased from families, schools, and jobs and this led to overcrowding that was a health concern.
- **Supply of Prevention Commodities:** We have supported four drop-in Centers with supplies like lubricants and condoms to avail to community members that they serve. These include Lifeline Youth Empowerment Center- Kampala, COSF (Clinic of the sun Foundation) Clinic- Kanyanya and Women with a Mission (WWM) in Northern Uganda and Icebreakers Uganda and FARUG.
- **MHFAP:** We trained and supported 6 *Mental Health First Aid Facilitators* to support community members with psychosocial support and link them to therapist thereafter. In 2023, due to the heightened homophobia, the requests for Mental Health Support services increased and that we were able to support 173 persons access support.



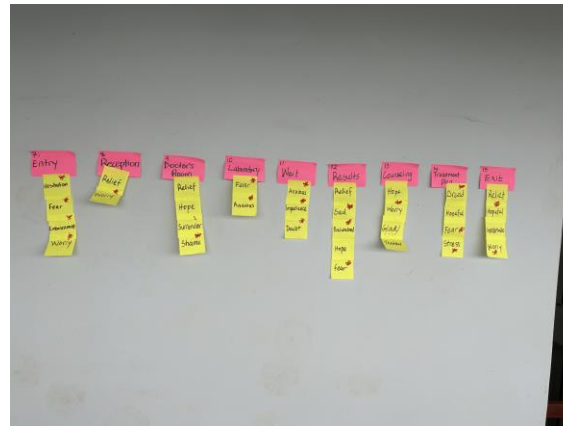
Figure 1 A Consultant provides technical training to Mental Health First Aid responders.

TO MAKE OUR WORK BETTER,

- Staff Security training and Support:** AWH staff were all supported with relocation after attacks, evictions and violence against LGBTQ persons and activists intensified. Two of our staff were evicted, 2 others were attacked physically and through USAID support to UKPC for emergency support. We sought support and relocated all seven staff members. We also conducted security training and acquired security equipment with support from Digital Defenders Protection.



- Team building retreat:** We ended the year with a lot of things to be proud of! We stayed Open! Our community trusted us to still get services. We believe the resilience we showed contributed to many clients still choosing to get services. We also started our year with a team building retreat, to rebuild ourselves, regenerate and encourage ourselves to come back and go again.



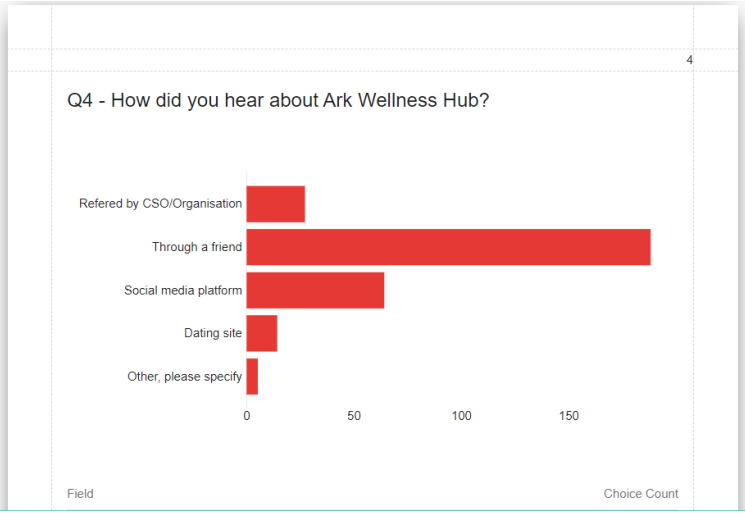
- Self-Check-in:** To improve confidentiality for clients while at the clinic, we provided a check-in tab for them to individually select the services they need. Clients often fail to speak up, especially where there are multiple clients and staff on their visit. The health worker can prepare for the clients without anyone one at the clinic knowing the purpose of the visit. Many clients have appreciated the self-check in and it has increased knowledge about the different services available for clients.



- News Articles:** In 2023, despite the AHA that has a provision not to share/broadcast or promote homosexuality, we shared our stories with many around the world in several news agencies including.
 - The New York Times [With Harsh Anti-L.G.B.T.Q. Law, Uganda Risks a Health Crisis - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com),
 - Vox News [Inside an LGBTQ clinic in Uganda, where homosexuality is now a crime - Vox](https://www.vox.com)
 - The Globprism [Inside an LGBTQ clinic in Uganda, where homosexuality is now a crime - \(globprism.com\)](https://www.globprism.com)
 - The Trouw [Ugandan trans woman Monalisa Akintole wears men's clothes again out of fear \(trouw.nl\)](https://www.trouw.nl)
 - The Sonntagsblatt [Despite anti-gay law: Clinic cares for queer people in Uganda | Sunday Newspaper - 360 Degrees Evangelical \(sonntagsblatt.de\)](https://www.sonntagsblatt.de)
 - The KuchuTimes Uganda [Pride in Health | Kuchu Times](https://www.kuchutimes.com)

WHAT THE COMMUNITY SAYS

The last quarter of 2023 (October -December), we asked some clients to share feedback about our work – View full [AWH client feedback report](#) here.



STORIES WORTH TELLING.

1. A gay couple of a Congolese and Burundian both living with HIV took a bus from Nakivale refugee camp to access ART because they had been denied the services. They took a 5-hour bus to get to Kampala and spent a night at a bus park. They reached out to us because they read about our work on social media. We took samples for viral load and CD4 count – refilled them with 6 months each and are continuing to support them remotely.
2. A 17-year-old client who bought anesthesia from a dentist, injected himself and used a pair of scissors to cut off the anal warts. After bleeding for days and the pain getting out of hand- he created an account on twitter, disguised himself and shared out through a confessions page on twitter and asked for support. He was directed to us, we helped him, and he is doing fine.
3. A 19-year-old artist from the slams of Kamwokya who enrolled on PrEP because he was making money through sex work to fund his music career. 5 months later he tested HIV positive but upon counselling him he informed us that one of his friends told him that PrEP also changes your sex from male to female. He discontinued taking it, yet he used to come pick his refills. This is one of the sad results of the unchecked propaganda by the anti- LGBTQ religious people that have enormous resources and platforms to spread wrong information about the drugs provided at LGBTQ clinics that its meant to change the sex of people.
4. A case of a 21-year-old man who also tested HIV positive at their family's doctor – he had gone to get treatment for anal gonorrhoea and the family doctor ran several tests including HIV and told his family. He was chased from home, they discontinued paying his tuition and getting ART with us and stays in a shelter we linked him too.

5.



Figure 2: A THANK YOU CAKE from a client after they virally suppressed after trying for more than 16 months.

KEY LESSONS.

- Telemedicine mode of service delivery ensures continuity of service delivery amidst volatile times.
- A comprehensive service package improves the desirability of accessing more services since more clients' needs are addressed.
- Unrestricted funding helps address challenges and respond with quick solutions during these volatile periods.
- There is a reduced usage of condoms as preventive measures, more sensitization needs to be done to improve the community risk perception. Further, lack of positive sex education strategies and the redundancy in the branding of prevention products to be age and generational appropriate could also be issues.
- Working in a legally restrictive environment makes service provision expensive.

Challenges.

- Our website, which was an interactive source of SRH information was taken down due to the threats by the Anti Homosexuality Act that would classify it as a tool for promotion of same-gender relationships.
- Scale up plans are hindered by little funding.
- Planning, programs development and implementation is hard because of an uncertain legal and social environment.
- Drug stock outs due to little funding and a slow response within the local supply chain.
- Research efforts are restricted to only the general population and KP specific research is illegal by the governing body.
- High staff turnover due to safety and security related issues that drive the workforce away.

Local support systems that deserve credit.

- Kiswa HC provided HIV self-Testing kits and fostering easy and fast access to HIV medications through CDC support.
- TASO and Kiswa who help us provide ART support seamlessly.
- UKPC supported our compliance with the Data Protection Office and Filing returns with Uganda Registration Services Bureau.
- SMUG for stewardship, access to information, legal support, and advocacy efforts to keep our clinic, staff, and clients safe.
- UNAIDS and WHO for their support in making sure access to services is maintained and there is no discrimination in health facilities.
- Ministry of Health Uganda for creating an enabling environment for people to access services amidst the AHA.





Figure 6 UNAIDS UGANDA VISIT



Figure 5 The AIDS Support Organization (TASO) Visit



Figure 4 UNAIDS and Infectious Diseases Institute Visit



Figure 3 Norwegian Embassy Visit



Figure 7 A visit by Dr. Frank Mugisha

