No Baby Should Be Born with HIV: Background on mothers2mothers

mothers2mothers was founded in 2001 to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV and sustain the long-term health of women and children by addressing the unique needs of pregnant women and new mothers living with HIV. Since then, mothers2mothers has helped over one million women, growing from one site in Cape Town, South Africa, to nearly 600 sites in seven sub-Saharan African countries.

Why We Act: The Facts

Mother-to-child transmission of HIV is almost entirely preventable. In fact, in the US and Europe, only one child a day is born with the virus. Yet, in sub-Saharan Africa – where 90 percent of the world’s pregnant women with HIV live –1000 babies are born with HIV every day. Without treatment, half of these children will die before the age of two. AIDS-related illnesses are also the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age.

Babies can be infected with HIV through mother-to-child transmission during pregnancy and birth, or while breastfeeding. Interventions like HIV testing, education, and safe and effective medications can reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission of HIV from 40 percent to less than 5 percent, and help keep mothers alive to raise their children. But in many regions of Africa, there is limited awareness and understanding among women about how to prevent HIV in newborns. Stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV can prevent many women from being tested and seeking medical care.

Health worker shortages in sub-Saharan Africa also leave many clinics critically understaffed, preventing life-saving information from being effectively communicated to women going through the crisis of HIV diagnosis. Without this kind of support, many pregnant women and new mothers living with HIV assume they are facing a death sentence and don’t seek the services necessary to keep themselves and their children healthy.

How We Work

The mothers2mothers approach is simple and effective: we employ and train mothers living with HIV to work alongside doctors and nurses, bringing critical information and support to pregnant women and new mothers with HIV. These “Mentor Mothers” have gone through prevention of mother-to-child transmission programs themselves. They are trained as peer educators and role models, educating pregnant women living with HIV on how to keep themselves healthy and what steps they can take to have a healthy, HIV-free baby.

Mentor Mothers work alongside doctors and nurses as paid members of the health care team, offering one-on-one peer education and group support sessions.
Our Impact

We employ Mentor Mothers to prevent new HIV infections among infants and keep their mothers alive. This improves the long-term health and wellness of women and children globally. Our simple and effective model is part of the Global Plan, led by UNAIDS, to reduce the number of new HIV infections among children by 90% and reduce the number of AIDS-related maternal deaths by 50%, by 2015.

- Improving the Health of Women and Children
  We work to prevent babies from contracting HIV and improve the health of their mothers. Women who visited a mothers2mothers site multiple times were more likely to take the medications they need, and more likely to have disclosed their HIV status to others, than women who visited just once. There is a significant correlation between disclosure and treatment. Disclosure of status makes women more likely to take ARVs.

- Strengthening health systems
  Globally, there is a shortage of 3.5 million health workers. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the impact of this shortage is felt acutely – the region has 25% of the global disease burden but only 3% of the world’s health workers. By working in health centers and clinics to offer personalized education and support to women and mothers living with HIV, Mentor Mothers strengthen health care delivery systems, providing critical support and alleviating the burden on the medical team.

- Employing and empowering women
  As members of a health care team, Mentor Mothers earn a salary, which enables them to provide for their families and develop skills that make them role models in the community. Some Mentor Mothers become permanent full-time mothers2mothers staff as Site Coordinators.

mothers2mothers is supported by hundreds of organizations and individuals including USAID, PEPFAR, CDC, and UNICEF. Our success demonstrates that a simple solution to a complex problem can improve the long-term health of women and children globally.

To learn more, visit: m2m.org or follow us: @m2mtweets.