

MAINTAINING ESSENTIAL HEALTH SERVICES FOR KEY POPULATIONS DURING TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

A Safety and Security Advisory from the Uganda Key Populations Consortium (UKPC)

December 2020

What is this advisory about?

The past year has been an extraordinary one for all Ugandans, including for members of key populations and the many individuals and organisations providing essential health services and other programmes. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in March this year added a new set of challenges to the day-to-day work to protect and promote key populations and health in an environment where this work was already risky and difficult. As the Government of Uganda implemented strict public health measures to try to contain the spread of the virus, organisations serving key populations struggled to quickly adapt to avoid service disruptions and to respond to an alarming number of human rights violations against vulnerable individuals attempting to access services or simply trying to stay alive when access to income, shelter and food became more and more difficult. Many lessons were learned over the past nine months as the situation has evolved in the country, including how as a community we need to be better prepared to maintain essential health programmes and to improve the safety and security of those of us who provide services and those of us who rely on those services for our health and survival.

As the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve in Uganda, we must not lose sight of other risks and challenges we face for our community. The holiday seasons are well known for increasing criminal activity involving robberies, break-ins, pick-pocketing and verbal and physical harassment and assault, including against members of key populations. This holiday seasons there are added risks linked to the upcoming elections, a period where, in the past, there have been many aggressions and violations against marginalised communities and against organisations and individuals who provide services.

Out of concern for the safety and security of community members and the organisations and service providers that provide for our health and other needs, the **Uganda Key Populations Consortium (UKPC)** is issuing this advisory. The purpose of the advisory is to provide practical information on how to strengthen safety and security for individuals and organisations to protect access to essential health services.

What are the main risks to your safety and security at this time?

a) Many organisations providing services to key population have closed for the holidays and may remain closed or only offer limited services until after Election Day on January 14. Therefore, they may not be able to respond to urgent needs.

b) Increased criminal activity over the holiday period affects all Ugandans; however, experience has shown that vulnerable groups, such as members of key populations, may experience more violations.

c) During previous elections, members of key populations have been singled out as political targets, which led to higher levels of verbal and physical violence and abuse, including from state security agencies.

d) Access to key services, such as HIV treatment, PrEP, condoms, lubricants, needle and syringe exchange, emergency contraception, emergency shelter, can be interrupted because of safety issues for both service providers and those who urgently need these services. It can be unsafe for outreach workers to be in the community or for individuals to travel to where the services are available.

e) People who visit families and relative or travel to their home communities can be a risk of verbal and physical abuse or may have mental health issues due to stigma, discrimination or violence.

f) The risk of acquiring COVID-19 remains high for all Ugandans, particularly for vulnerable individuals such as members of key populations who must move about to earn their income or who must live in unsafe environments because of stigma and discrimination against them as well as their limited access to things like masks, sanitisers or clean water.

What should you do to protect yourself and others?

- Be smart, be aware! Think about your safety and security risks and what you can do to protect yourself during these uncertain times. These are some things to consider:
- Where am I most at risk in my daily routine (walking to the bus stop, walking from the bus stop to the clinic or office) and what can I do to lower the risk (change my route, always travel with a friend or colleague)?

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 - Does my organisation have safety and security policies and procedures, and have we reviewed them recently?
 - How can we provide more services 'virtually' or deliver them differently to reduce the need to have people on our premises or to have our service users travel?
 - Is my housing situation as safe as it can be? Do I have good locks on my door? Can I rely on neighbours or others in my community to help me in a crisis? Should I stay with friends for a while if I don't think I am safe where I am?
- **Be prepared!** When planning to move outside your home or your office, know your environment and the level of safety and security risk. As part of COVID-19 prevention, we are asked to limit our day-to-day travel, which can apply for other needs. Reconsider whether you need to move about and what alternatives are available. For persons on ART and other treatment support and consumables, contact your service organisation to find out if you can be provided with supplies for at least three additional months.
 - **Know the law and how it applies to you!** Follow the law and refrain from wearing colours considered to be symbols of a particular political party in Uganda. If possible, follow regular updates issued by the Uganda Police Force on their various **social media platforms**.
 - **Have a plan!** Whether you are a community member or a service provider, you need to have a plan in case something should happen to you. Do you have emergency contacts? If you do, are they in different places (on a piece of paper in your purse) if your phone is taken? Do your 'contacts' know what they are supposed to do when you need help?

What should you do if something happens?

For any security emergencies, use the existing channels in your communities or contact your organisations on the following details:

COMMUNITY TOLL-FREE NUMBER /

HOTLINE

MSM	0393 239014 / 0704449988
Transgender Women	0794 462818
Transgender Persons (General)	0393 217 497
LBQ Womyn	0800100093 / 0757 709096
Female Sex Workers	0704 616 891 / 0701 487643 / 0800333177
Persons Who Use and Inject Drugs	0414 664730
People Living with HIV	0800 333123
LGBTQ+ Community	0759 787 772

REGIONAL CONTACTS

Greater Masaka	0755 711264
West Nile and Northern	0781 599254
Western Uganda	0758 595709 / 0782596556
Eastern Uganda	0701 235286

In case of any COVID-19 symptoms, follow the guidance provided by the Ministry of Health in Uganda.

Emergency contact information and updates

For more information relating to this advisory, please contact the Coordinator of Uganda Key Populations Consortium on coordinator@ugandakpc.org.

For regular updates on the security and safety situation of key populations in Uganda, visit UKPC's website at <https://ugandakpc.org/>