

# Global AIDS Progress Report 2015



## Republic of the Marshall Islands

*Submission date: 08 April 2016*



**NACi**  
NATIONAL  
ADVISORY  
COMMITTEE  
HIV • STIs • TB  
REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

## FOREWORD



*Republic of the Marshall Islands*  
MINISTRY OF HEALTH  
P.O. Box 16  
Majuro, Marshall Islands MH 96960



Phone: (692) 625-5660/5661 \* Fax: (692) 625 3432\* Email: [k.briand123@yahoo.com](mailto:k.briand123@yahoo.com); [mailvnnlang@gmail.com](mailto:mailvnnlang@gmail.com) zxc

### MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH

*The Ministry of Health adheres to its commitment in fighting the epidemic of HIV/AIDS here in the Marshall Islands. In the past, we have progress steadily in implementing our activities with partnership with RMI National Advisory Committee, National and Local Government, Non-Government Agencies, and the community.*

*We have encountered challenges but stood up on the waves of tide. Our commitment to a healthy and happy Marshallese population is our main purpose.*

*We would like to thank all the people that gave their best in this program. To the People Living with HIV/AIDS, the Ministry is capable of helping you without hesitation and discrimination.*

*On behalf of the Ministry of Health, we are endorsing this Global AIDS Program Reporting FY2015.*

*Komol Tata,*

Dr. Kenmar Briand  
Interim Secretary of Health

## Table of Contents

FOREWORD.....	2
1. STATUS AT A GLANCE .....	6
1.1 The Report Writing Process and the Inclusiveness of the Stakeholders in this Process.....	6
1.2 The Status of the Epidemic.....	6
HIV Prevalence Rate for 15-49 years old.....	6
Summary of STI/HIV Cases.....	8
STI/HIV Cases.....	8
1.3 The Policy and Programmatic Response .....	8
1.4 Global Reporting Republic of the Marshall Islands Indicator Summary Data .....	11
2. OVERVIEW OF THE EPIDEMIC .....	17
2.1 The National Context .....	17
2.2 The Organization of Health Care Services.....	19
2.3 The National Health Portfolio Plan 2016 .....	20
2.4 National HIV Coordination Mechanism .....	20
2.5 The National HIV & STI Strategy 2013-2017.....	21
2.6 Monitoring and Evaluation of the National Response .....	22
2.7 Funding the National Response .....	23
Annual allocations by Year – US\$ .....	24
Estimated expenditure by GARP categories by year US\$.....	24
2.8 HIV Epidemiology.....	25
Status of Cumulative HIV Diagnoses, RMI, 1984-2015 .....	25
Active Cases by Age Group RMI 2015 .....	26
HIV Cumulative cases by Transmission RMI 1984-2015 .....	26
3. NATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE AIDS EPIDEMIC.....	27
Target 1: Reduce sexual transmission of HIV by 50% by 2015.....	27
Target 2: Reduce transmission of HIV among people who inject drugs by 50% by 2015 .....	31
Target 3: Eliminate mother to child transmission of HIV by 2015 and substantially reduce AIDS-related neonatal deaths .....	31
Target 4: Have 15million people living with HIV on antiretroviral treatment by 2015.....	32
Target 5: Reduce tuberculosis deaths in people living with HIV by 50% by 2015 .....	33
Target 6: Reach a significant level of annual global expenditure (US22-23billion) in low and middle income countries.....	34

<i>Target 7: Critical Enablers and Synergies with Development Sectors</i> .....	34
<i>Target 8: Eliminating Stigma &amp; Discrimination</i> .....	35
4. <i>Best Practices</i> .....	36
4.1 <i>Governance and Program Management</i> .....	36
4.2 <i>A Supportive Policy Environment</i> .....	36
4.3 <i>Scale-up of Prevention Programs</i> .....	37
4.4 <i>Scale-up of Care, Treatment and/or Support Programs</i> .....	37
4.5 <i>Monitoring and Evaluation</i> .....	37
5. <i>Major Challenges and Gaps</i> .....	38
5.1 <i>Treatment Care and Support</i> .....	38
5.2 <i>Data Collection</i> .....	39
5.3 <i>Resources</i> .....	39
6. <i>Recommendations</i> .....	40
6.1 <i>Program Management</i> .....	40
6.2 <i>Policy &amp; Coordination</i> .....	40
6.3 <i>Prevention, knowledge and behavior change</i> .....	41
6.4 <i>HIV Testing and Counseling</i> .....	41
6.5 <i>Care, Treatment and Support:</i> .....	41
6.6 <i>Financing</i> .....	42
6.7 <i>Human Resources</i> .....	42
6.8 <i>Monitoring &amp; Evaluation and Surveillance</i> .....	42
7. <i>Support from the Country's Development Partners (if applicable)</i> .....	43
8. <i>Monitoring and evaluation environment</i> .....	43
ANNEXES.....	44
ANNEX 1: <i>Consultation/preparation process for the country report on monitoring the progress towards the implementation of the 2011 Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS</i> .....	44
ANNEX 2: <i>National Funding Matrix</i> .....	45

Acronyms

<i>AIDS</i>	<i>Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome</i>
<i>ARV/ART</i>	<i>Anti-Retro-Viral Therapy/Treatment</i>
<i>CDC</i>	<i>Center for Disease Control</i>
<i>CEO</i>	<i>Chief Executive Officer</i>
<i>CTR</i>	<i>Counseling Testing and Referral</i>
<i>DHS</i>	<i>Demographic Health Survey</i>
<i>EPPSO</i>	<i>Economic Planning and Policy Statistics Office</i>
<i>GARP/GAPR</i>	<i>Global AIDS Response Progress/Global AIDS Progress Report</i>
<i>GF</i>	<i>Global Funds for HIV Malaria and TB</i>
<i>HAETC</i>	<i>Hawai'i AIDS Education and Training Center</i>
<i>HIV</i>	<i>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</i>
<i>HRSA</i>	<i>Health Resources &amp; Services Administration</i>
<i>MDG</i>	<i>Millennium Development Goals</i>
<i>M&amp;E</i>	<i>Monitoring and Evaluation</i>
<i>MIEPI</i>	<i>Marshall Islands Epidemiology for Prevention Initiative</i>
<i>MOH</i>	<i>Ministry of Health</i>
<i>NAC</i>	<i>National AIDS Committee</i>
<i>NASA</i>	<i>National AIDS Spending Assessment</i>
<i>NCPI</i>	<i>National Commitments and Policy Instrument</i>
<i>NGOs</i>	<i>Non Government Organizations</i>
<i>PIJAAG</i>	<i>Pacific Islands AIDS Advisory Group</i>
<i>PMTCT</i>	<i>Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission</i>
<i>PTCT</i>	<i>Prevention of Parent to Child Transmission</i>
<i>RMI</i>	<i>Republic of the Marshall Islands</i>
<i>RRRT</i>	<i>Regional Rights Resource Team</i>
<i>SPC</i>	<i>Secretariat of the Pacific Community</i>
<i>SRH</i>	<i>Sexual &amp; Reproductive Health</i>
<i>STD</i>	<i>Sexually Transmitted Disease</i>
<i>STI</i>	<i>Sexually Transmitted Infections</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tuberculosis</i>
<i>ToT</i>	<i>Training of Trainers</i>
<i>UNAIDS</i>	<i>United Nations AIDS Coordination Group</i>
<i>US</i>	<i>United States of America</i>
<i>WAM</i>	<i>WaanAelon in Majel</i>
<i>WHO</i>	<i>World Health Organisations</i>
<i>WUTMI</i>	<i>Women United Together in the Marshall Islands</i>
<i>YTYiH</i>	<i>Youth to Youth in Health</i>

# 1. STATUS AT A GLANCE

## 1.1 The Report Writing Process and the Inclusiveness of the Stakeholders in this Process

The focal points from Government and NGO sector agreed on a work plan for data collection, analysis and submission of the report. A small working group was established, and key contact points identified to work on select components of the report.

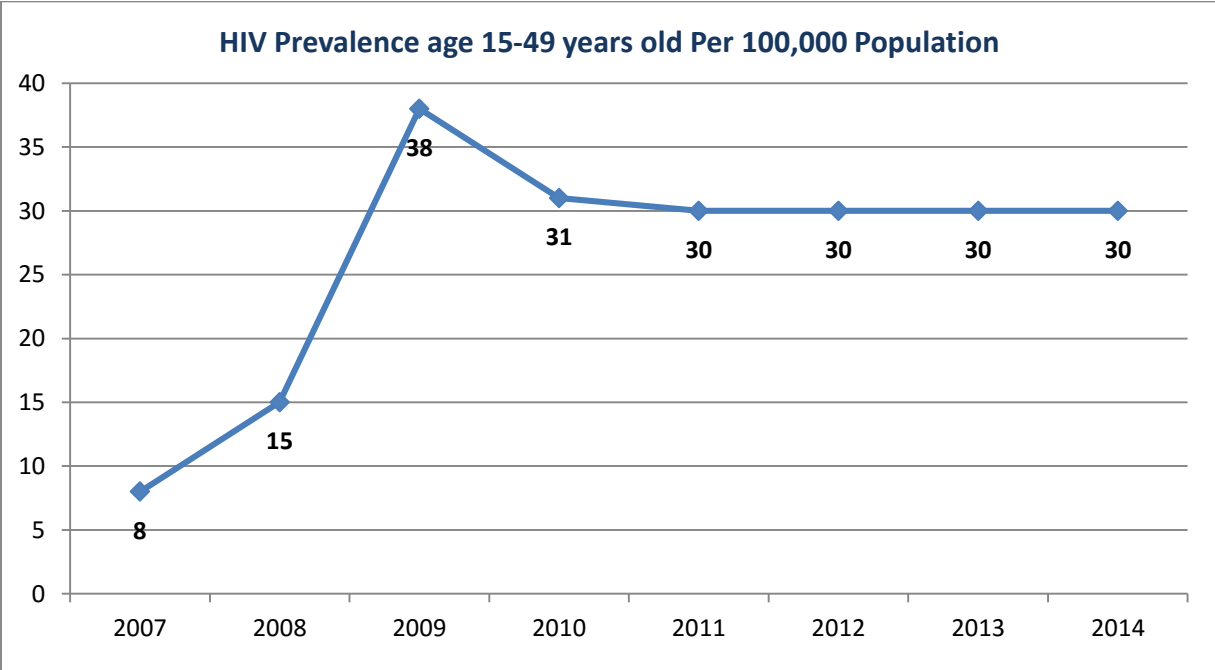
The working group reviewed program and data reports and consulted with implementing partners to gather the information for this report.

Government, non-government, private sector and academe sectors were invited to a validation meeting to discuss the purpose of Global AIDS Progress Report, and data collection process. The government and NGO focal points presented the report identifying the achievements and challenges and briefly discussed key issues raised.

## 1.2 The Status of the Epidemic

RMI is considered to be a low prevalence setting for HIV. The number of people reported to be living with HIV in the Marshall Islands remains low. At the end of 2015, the cumulative incidence of HIV in the Republic of the Marshall Islands was 28 cases, since the first case was identified in 1984.

*HIV Prevalence Rate for 15-49 years old*



Two new cases were identified in 2014. However, one of the confirmed cases passed away two days after diagnoses from full-blown AIDS and the other left the country which puts RMI with 8 people living with HIV. Of these, seven are currently on ARV treatment; the eighth has decided to stop ART due to the side effects. All are living in Majuro. Three are male and five are female. The age range of those currently living with HIV on-island is between 21-40 years, with the biggest cluster of four in the 26-30 year age range.

Of the 28 cases, heterosexual transmission appears to be the dominant mode in the 25 cases. Mother to child transmission is the next most common mode of transmission. Eleven cases have died since diagnosed, and another seven cases have left the island, leaving seven currently living and receiving medical care. No new mother to child transmission in 2015.

Low levels of knowledge and unprotected sexual activity, particularly among young people, is thought to be the most significant risk factors, but there has been little new data since the 2007 Demographic Health Survey was conducted, so any shifts in behaviors or risk factors are not well-documented. Alcohol use associated with unprotected sexual behaviors, particularly amongst young people, was identified as a significant risk in the 2009 Youth Risk Behaviors survey, one of the few recent behavioral surveys recently documented.

There is only minimal increase in positive syphilis cases. In Ebeye, difficulty in accessing BD Probtec machine in Majuro laboratory. There is also difficulty in performing swabs with the limited capacity for swab culture and sensitivity in local laboratory. Most GC diagnosis were syndromic in nature. For Chlamydia testing, the BD Probtec machine in Majuro laboratory is used for testing and confirmation.

Sexually transmitted infection poses as one of the greater risks among all ages, but more so for the youths. Syphilis and Chlamydia remain to be the two most common form of STI which threaten the livelihood out of the population. The Marshall Islands, although, it has been considered a low prevalence for HIV, RMI cannot live with a feeling of complacency. All the known and recommended measures have been postulated as our protection and control procedure.

## Summary of STI/HIV Cases

### STI/HIV Cases

STI	FY 2009		FY 2010		FY 2011		FY2012		FY2013		FY2014	
	Positive Case	Prevalence Rate	Positive Case	Prevalence Rate	Positive Case	Prevalence Rate	Positive Case	Prevalence Rate	Positive Case	Prevalence Rate	Positive Case	Prevalence Rate
Syphilis	486	90	342	63	165	31	129	24	126	24	130	24
Gonorrhea	107	20	116	21	96	18	25	5	4	1	16	3
Chlamydia	393	73	331	61	152	29	120	23	121	23	171	32
HIV	10	2	8	2	8	2	8	2	8	2	8	2

Source: STI/HIV Program, Majuro & Ebeye Prevalence rate is per 10,000

No test done in Ebeye hospital. Difficulty in accessing BD Probtex machine in Majuro laboratory. There is also difficulty in Performing swabs with the limited capacity for swab culture and sensitivity in local laboratory.

Most GC diagnosis was syndromic in nature. Presumptive Chlamydia treatment is provided to all prenatal women and their partners.

### 1.3 The Policy and Programmatic Response

The Republic of the Marshall Islands is a signatory to the UN Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS in 2011. This declaration aims to eliminate HIV throughout the world, and has commitments to prevention, treatment, elimination of stigma and discrimination and supporting the human rights of people living with HIV or perceived to be at high risk.

The Marshall Islands response is coordinated by the National Advisory Committee on HIV, STIs and Tuberculosis (National Advisory Committee), which was appointed in 2011. The Terms of Reference permit up to 15 members, with seven from civil society organizations. Of the new members elected, they are from the following sectors: Ministry of Health 4; private sector 2; Non-Government Organizations 3; Church 1; traditional leaders 1; Other Ministries 1; Higher Education 1.



The NAC identified that one of the key barriers to effectively addressing HIV in the Marshall Islands is the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV. The NAC identified that it would draw on both the strengths and address the challenges represented by culture to effectively address HIV in RMI. The development of vigorous and transparent partnerships across government and civil society is intended to be the foundation for a strong response. The membership of the new NAC, drawn from government, community NGOs and the private sector and learning institutions, is the first step in developing strong and effective collaborative partnerships.

With a new National Strategy updated in 2012, the National Advisory Committee on STDs, HIV & TB (NAC) and MOH are currently overseeing the implementation of the HIV and STIs National Strategic Plan 2013-2017.

There have been advances in political leadership of the response to HIV and STIs in the Marshall Islands. The Parliament's induction session in 2012 invited consultants from UNFPA and UNAIDS to meet with members to discuss issues including women, poverty and HIV. The Majuro HIV Clinician was invited to provide an update on the HIV situation in the Marshall Islands, including the numbers of people living with HIV and receiving antiretroviral medications. In late 2011, the Secretary for Health spoke at the National Advisory Committee Inauguration. The Attorney General's Office has been involved in reviewing RMI legislation and policies and drafting proposed new legislation to protect people living with HIV. In Ebeye, the Mayor and traditional leaders endorsed the HIV and STI prevention efforts during World AIDS Day.

A review of HIV, Human Rights and the Law was conducted by the regional organization RRRT in 2009. This reviewed existing legislation to identify its scope for protecting the human rights of those who are living with HIV or at risk of HIV. This review identified a number of inconsistencies between existing policies, legislation and practice related to the protection of human rights. Although the anti-discrimination protections of the Communicable Diseases Act are helpful, other aspects are likely to impede prevention of HIV and sexual health. Some provisions of the Communicable Diseases Act are inconsistent with a human rights based approach to prevention, treatment care and support. The review recommends strengthening the privacy and confidentiality provisions, removing HIV from the definition of communicable disease, exclusion of HIV from mandatory testing provisions, changes in criminal law (e.g. criminalizing sex work), provision of information and condoms for prisoners, and protection against sexual violence.

The RRRT review also suggests that Government and the private sector should develop a code of practice on HIV in the workplace which protects people from stigma and encourages information, education, access to services and confidentiality.

There is policy within the Ministry of Health to respect the confidentiality of clients. However, there is not yet any law to protect people who are positive. There is no legal framework for ethical

human research – which means that there are no laws to protect and ensure that ethical research occurs.

Mandatory testing is required for some population groups, contrary to global recommendations on HIV and human rights. The HIV screening policy states that screening (or evidence of a test) is required for people seeking visas, public servants, and foreign workers (although testing is not universally enforced for entrance).

In addition to legislation specifically about HIV, protection is provided through other laws and treaties. The Republic of the Marshall Islands is party to several UN treaties on human rights (including the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The Marshall Islands has oversight, although monitoring and compliance are still in planning stages. There is also a discussion about identifying an Ombudsman's office. The Domestic Violence Prevention & Protection Act which was enacted in 2011 includes protection of anybody living under the same roof. Violence is defined as physical harm inflicted, psychological verbal or economic or social abuse.

## 1.4 Global Reporting Republic of the Marshall Islands Indicator Summary Data

	Indicators	Value 2014	Value 2015	Source	Comments
Indicators for the general population	1.1 Young People: Knowledge about HIV Prevention*	Data reported in 2013	No new data	2006 Youth SGS	8.4% of males were able to answer all 5 questions on knowledge of HIV prevention correctly 3.8% of women were able to answer all 5 questions on knowledge of HIV prevention correctly
	1.2 Sex Before the Age of 15	Data reported in 2013	No new data	2006 Youth SGS	15% of young women who have had sexual intercourse before the age of 15 24.6% of young men who have had sexual intercourse before the age of 15
	1.3 Multiple sexual partners	Data reported 2013	No new data	Population-based survey, DHS 2007	3.3% of women aged 15-49 who have had sexual intercourse with more than one partner in the last 12 months. 9% of men aged 15-49 who have had sexual intercourse with more
	1.4 Condom Use During Higher Risk-Sex*	Data reported in 2013	No new data	Population-based survey, DHS 2007	10.6 % of women aged 15-49 who had more than one sexual partners in the past 12 months who report the use of a condom during their last intercourse* 19.5% of men aged 15-49 who had more than one sexual partners in the past 12 months who report the use of a condom during their last intercourse * based on 25-49 un-weighted cases.
	1.5 HIV Testing in the General Population	Overall= 86% Female: 86%	86%	Routine MOH surveillance data	

		Male: 87%			
	1.6. HIV prevalence from antenatal clinics by age group	Female: 40% Male: 0% Overall: 25%	0%	Routine MOH surveillance data	913 women tested for HIV at antenatal care, zero positive
	1.20 HIV incidence rate	8 cases	0% incidence rate	Routine MOH surveillance data	8 cases for FY2015, 1 of 8 died in March 2015 No new HIV case
Indicators for sex workers					
	2.2 Sex Workers: Condom Use	n/a	No new data		
	2.3 Sex Workers: HIV Testing	n/a	No new data		
	2.4 Sex Workers: HIV Prevalence	n/a	No new data		
Indicators for men who have sex with men					
	2.5 Men who have sex with men: Condom Use	n/a	No new data		
	2.6 Men who have sex with men: HIV Testing	n/a	No new data		
	2.7. Men who have sex with men: HIV Prevalence	n/a	No new data		
Indicators for IDUs	2.8 People who inject drugs: Number of needles/IDU	No IDUs			
	2.9. People who inject drugs: Condom Use	No IDUs			
	2.10 People who inject drugs: Safe Injecting Practices	No IDUs			
	2.11 People who inject drugs: HIV Testing	No IDUs			
	2.12 People who inject drugs: HIV Prevalence	No IDUs			
	2.13 People on opioid substitution therapy	No IDUs			

Indicators for inmates	2.14. HIV prevalence in inmates/detainees	No data	No data		
Indicators for transgender	2.15. HIV prevalence in transgender people	No data	No data		
Prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT)	3.1 Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission	0%	0%	Routine MOH surveillance data	
	3.1 a Prevention of mother-to-child transmission during breastfeeding	0%	0%	Routine MOH surveillance data	
	3.2 Early Infant Diagnosis	0%	0%	Routine MOH surveillance data	
	3.3 Mother-to-Child transmission rate (modelled)	0%	0%	Routine MOH surveillance data	
	3.3 a Mother-to-child transmission of HIV (based on programme data)	0%	0%	Routine MOH surveillance data	
	3.4 Pregnant women who were tested for HIV and received their results		100%	Routine MOH surveillance data	Total of 913 pregnant women tested for HIV, zero positive results
	3.5 Testing coverage of pregnant women's partners (UA)		0%	Routine MOH surveillance data	Partners of pregnant women do not get tested for HIV
	3.7 Coverage of infant ARV prophylaxis (UA)	0%	No new data	Routine MOH surveillance data	No HIV+ pregnant women FY 2015
	3.9 Cotrimoxazole (CTX) prophylaxis coverage (UA)		No new data	Routine MOH surveillance data	No HIV+ pregnant women FYI 2015
ART Treatment	4.1 HIV Treatment: Antiretroviral Therapy		7 on ART 28 Cumulative	Routine MOH surveillance data	8 eligible for ART and 7 are on ART – one chooses not to take ART. There are no children who are HIV+; 5 females- all on ARV tx; 3 males, but only two on ARV tx. 2014: 88%
	4.2 HIV Treatment: 12 months retention	88%	88%	Routine MOH surveillance data	2013:1 (100%) 2014: 0, here is no case that started in 2014

					2015: Total of 8 cases, 1 of 8 died March 2015
	4.2a HIV Treatment: 24 months retention	88%	100%	Routine MOH surveillance data	
	4.2b HIV Treatment: 60 months retention	88%	No new data	Routine MOH surveillance data	
	4.3 HIV Care Coverage	29%	29%	Routine MOH surveillance data	8 cases out of the cumulative 28 cases
	4.4 ART stockouts	No stockouts	No stockouts	Routine MOH surveillance data	
	4.5 Late HIV diagnoses	No data	No data	Routine MOH surveillance data	
	4.6 Viral Load suppression	No data	No data	Routine MOH surveillance data	
	4.7 AIDS-related deaths	0%	1 death FY2015	Routine MOH surveillance data	
AIDS Spending	6.1 AIDS Spending - Domestic and international AIDS spending by categories and financing sources	2013: Domestic= 85,000 International=431,765  2014: Domestic= 85,000 International=594,774		MOH Financial Data	
Gender	7.1 Prevalence of Recent Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)	51%	51%	RMI National Study on Family Health and Safety published 2014 March Dāpij Aenōmman Eo Ilo Mōko Imōd	The RMI Family Health and Safety Study was conducted in 2012-2013 to measure the prevalence of violence among women and girls 15-69 years old. 51% reported physical and/or sexual violence by a partner. 91% of all VAW incidences went unreported by the victims due to shame, fear, dependency, out of love, to keep the family together, and to ensure children have their father around.

					<i>Women justified the abuse saying it was right for their husband to beat them up if she was unfaithful, didn't do the house chores, and if she refuses to have sex with him.</i>
<i>Stigma and discrimination</i>	<i>8.1 Discriminatory attitudes towards person living with HIV (new indicator)</i>	<i>No new data</i>	<i>No new data</i>	<i>No study on stigma &amp; discrimination</i>	
<i>HIV/TB Co-infection</i>	<i>11.1. Co-Management of Tuberculosis and HIV Treatment</i>	<i>No new co-infection case</i>	<i>1 co-infection with TB, this case is a relapse</i>	<i>RMI TB Patient Registry</i>	
	<i>11.2. Proportion of people living with HIV newly enrolled in HIV care with active tuberculosis (TB)</i>	<i>No new data</i>	<i>No new data</i>	<i>RMI TB Patient Registry</i>	
	<i>11.3. Proportion of people living with HIV newly enrolled in HIV care started on tuberculosis (TB) preventive therapy</i>	<i>Zero</i>	<i>Zero</i>	<i>RMI TB Patient Registry</i>	
<i>Hepatitis/HIV co-infection</i>	<i>11.4. Hepatitis B testing</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>Routine MOH surveillance data</i>	
	<i>11.5. Proportion of HIV-HBV co-infected persons currently on combined treatment</i>	<i>2014: Male= 0 Female= 0 Over all: No New Case</i>	<i>No new data</i>	<i>Routine MOH surveillance data</i>	
	<i>11.6. Hepatitis C testing</i>		<i>12.5%</i>	<i>Routine MOH surveillance data</i>	<i>The rest of the patients weren't able to get tested due to lack of follow up. They were appointed for blood extraction but never showed up</i>
	<i>11.7. Proportion of persons diagnosed with HIV-HCV infection started on HCV</i>		<i>No new data</i>	<i>Routine MOH surveillance data</i>	

	<i>treatment during a specified time frame (e.g. 12 months)</i>				
STIs	<i>11.8. Syphilis testing in pregnant women</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>National programme data</i>	
	<i>11.9. Syphilis rates among antenatal care attendees</i>		<i>0.7%</i>	<i>National programme data</i>	
	<i>11.10. Syphilis treatment coverage among syphilis positive antenatal care attendees</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>National programme data</i>	
	<i>11.11. Congenital syphilis rate (live births and stillbirth)</i>	<i>No data available</i>	<i>2 cases of congenital syphilis</i>	<i>National case reporting</i>	
	<i>11.12. Men with urethral discharge</i>	<i>No data available</i>	<i>26 cases reported</i>	<i>National case reporting</i>	
	<i>11.13. Genital ulcer disease in adults</i>	<i>No data available</i>	<i>No new cases</i>	<i>National case reporting</i>	



## **2. OVERVIEW OF THE EPIDEMIC**

### **2.1 The National Context<sup>1</sup>**

The Marshall Islands consists of 29 coral atolls and 5 coral islands lying between 160-173 degrees east longitude and 4-14 degrees north latitude, in the North Pacific Ocean. These atolls and islands form two parallel groups – the Ratak (sunrise) chain, and the Ralik (sunset) chain. The Marshallese people are of Micronesian origin. The matrilineal Marshallese culture revolves around a complex system of clans and lineages tied to land ownership. The Marshall Islands total land mass measures around 181 square kilometers and its exclusive economic zone measures about 2 million square kilometers. The highest elevation is around 10 meters above sea level, with the average elevation at 2 meters.

The Marshall Islands became an independent country in 1986 with the termination of trustee arrangements under 1945 UN Trusteeship Council Agreement. Although the country assumed responsibility as an independent entity, it retained a political economic and defense relationship with the United States under the Compact of Free Association. The agreement underlying the Compact has been renewed twice since 1945. The current Compact agreement between the RMI and the USA operates until 2023<sup>2</sup>.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands is a parliamentary democracy. Its government is modeled on the Westminster system, with a bi-cameral legislature composed of two houses: the Council of Iroij (Chiefs) and the Nitijela (Parliament). Legislative power sits with the Nitijela; the House of Iroij has the power to comment on bills in relation to customary and traditional practices. At the municipal level, each atoll has a local government composed of an elected mayor and council.

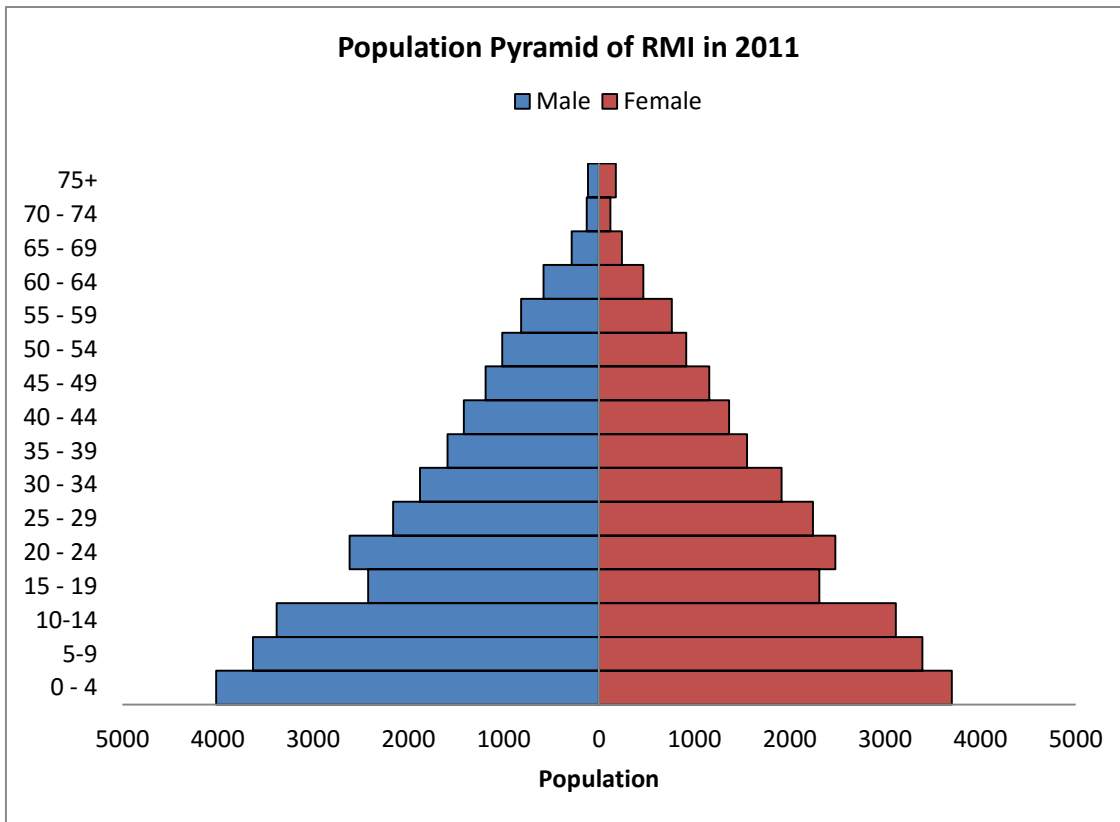
Although high fertility rates contributed to high population growth during the 1990s, population began to decrease in the early 2000s, with a fall in fertility rates and an increase in outward migration, largely to the United States. The estimated population in 2007 was 53,000<sup>3</sup>. RMI has an estimated median age of 19.2, making it one of the youngest populations in the Pacific, and indicating that future population growth could be high, subject to outward migration.

---

<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge the 2009 Progress Report on the Millennium Development Goals, EPPSO, 2009 and 2007 Demographic Health Survey, EPPSO, 2008; the 2012 Annual Report of the Ministry of Health, RMI, Ministry of Health

<sup>2</sup> The Millennium Development Goals 2009 Report on Progress, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Economic Policy, Planning and Statistics Office, RMI Government, 2009 Vision 2018: The Strategic Development Plan Framework 2002-2018, the Marshall Islands, 2001; the case for Justice for Micronesians in Hawai'i, 2011, Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice Policy Brief; Millennium Development Goals

<sup>3</sup> Although a census was undertaken in 2011, this data was not yet available: a pre-release 'running total' identified that the population for the RMI Census stands at 52,558, and a 3.42% change on the 1999 census. Although this was an increase overall of 1738, it represented a decrease in the population of 18 atolls. Kwajalein experiences an overall percent change increase of 4.3% (469 more persons). Majuro experienced an overall increase of 16.3% (3,862 persons). A major contribution factor is the migration rate. Source: Preliminary running totals for Census 2011 to date, EPPSO website accessed 15 March 2011



Source: RMI MOH Annual Report 2014 – revised population pyramid by EPPSO

RMI is highly urbanized, with the largest urban center located at Majuro (on Majuro atoll) and Ebeye islands, across from the Kwajalein military base, is the second largest urban center. Housing conditions in these islands are crowded, with the average urban household carrying up to 7.6 members (compared to 6.6 in rural areas). With large household sizes, and limited land, living conditions are dense and challenging. One quarter of all households uses only one room for sleeping.

While services such as education, health and housing, and associated infrastructure, including transport and telecommunications, and utilities such as electricity, water and sewerage are available in Majuro and Ebeye, access to these services in the outer islands is less regular – although access to solar power is changing some aspects of this situation in the outer islands.

RMI’s economy is described as similar to many Pacific island nations: it is remote from major markets, has a narrow production and export base and is vulnerable to external shocks, and relatively depended on official (aid) transfers. Funding from the Compact of Free association provides over half of the RMIs annual budgetary resources. Remittances are not a major contributor to the household incomes in RMI. The public sector plays a dominant role in contributing to Gross Domestic Productivity and employment. The primary commercial

industries include wholesale and retail trade, general business services, commercial fisheries, construction, tourism and light manufacturing

Over the last decade, while infant mortality and life expectancy improved, the incidence of child malnutrition and adult obesity has increased. As a result, a large proportion of the budget is dedicated to curative health care programs due to life style disease such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and cancer. With on-island health care services unable to address many of these issues, off-island referrals consume much of the health resources.

HIV data is incomplete because testing is still in its infancy, voluntary testing is rare, and virtually no testing has been done on outer islands. The majority of testing has been testing of women visiting the antenatal clinic, taxi drivers, and students for college entrance health clearance. These groups might not be the people at highest risk, but they enable testing of the same identifiable groups of people year by year. Hence, if the HIV epidemic was to rapidly expand, this testing would quickly identify that change was occurring.

In 2015, a cumulative total of 28 people in the Marshall Islands were reported as living with HIV. Of these, 13 were male, 11 female and 4 unknown (because gender was not reported). In 2014, the cumulative incidence was 44 per 100,000 (this is included to enable comparison with other countries, even though the population is not 100,000. Calculated with the 2011 RMI Household Population Census). Only 8 of the people living with HIV currently reside in the Marshall Islands.

## ***2.2 The Organization of Health Care Services***

In 1986 the RMI Government adopted the concept of Primary Health Care declared by the WHO in 1978.

The Ministry's executive function is headed by the Secretary who provides overall leadership in administering the affairs of the Ministry. The Secretary facilitates cooperative efforts with other Ministries and supplies the Minister of Health with policy advice and assistance with Cabinet level concerns. The secretary is assisted by five Assistant Secretaries directing the areas of Policy and Planning.

The health care system is comprised of two hospitals, one in Majuro and one in Ebeye and fifty-six (56) active health care centers in the outer atolls and islands. Both hospitals provide primary and secondary care, but limited tertiary care. Patients who need tertiary care are referred to Honolulu or the Philippines.

In addition, there are two private clinics in Majuro – a general practice and an optical care. There are also clinics which directly provide primary health care services to those whose atolls experienced the nuclear testing; alongside the Kumiti 'wellness' Center operated by Canvasback

Mission, and the Taiwan Health Center, both of which offer programs addressing the prevention of NCDs.

MOH works in conjunction with the Community Health Councils (CHC) in the outer islands. The system requires community participation in health care and ensures that the community beyond the urban centers are involved and included in the provision of health care services.

Health centers in the outer islands are the focus for preventative, promotion and essential clinical care services. All health care centers are permanently staffed by full time Health Assistants who provide health services and work with the Community Health Councils to promote and foster the concept of shared responsibility for health.

### ***2.3 The National Health Portfolio Plan 2016***

The Ministry of Health recently revised a National Health Portfolio FY2016. This portfolio acknowledges the national Goals, Objectives and Indicators as stated in the Vision 2018 Strategic Development Plan Framework, 2003-2018 with specific reference to Goal 4: A Healthy People.

The Strategy identifies the Bureau of Primary Health Care Services (BPHC) as responsible for strengthening preventive programs/services at the community level. The Bureau's responsible for the provision of services related to HIV& STIs, under its related programs in Infectious Diseases and Reproductive Health, which provides medical direction in prevention and treatment services related to reproductive health and family planning; hepatitis prevention; sexually transmitted infections (STIs); HIV and AIDS; TB; leprosy; and filariasis. The Bureau coordinates these services across Majuro, Ebeye and to the outer islands.

### ***2.4 National HIV Coordination Mechanism***

The Ministry of Health re-established the National AIDS Committee as a coordination mechanism for the response to HIV, STIs and TB in November 2011 (RMI/HIV-STI-TB NAC).

The NAC is responsible for supporting engagement and coordination between the Ministry of Health, other state local agencies, non-government organizations, and community representatives for identifying needs, determining priorities, and developing comprehensive HIV, STI&TB plans.

Membership of the NAC is limited to fifteen members. Its current membership includes representation from: NGOs in the community and health sectors, private sector, higher education institutions, faith based organizations, and the Ministry of Health. Meetings are scheduled each

quarter. A joint secretariat operates between the Ministry and WUTMI<sup>4</sup> to provide administrative and other support. The role and responsibilities of the NAC addresses the following functions:

- promoting collaboration between the government and non-government sector through the development of plans and activities aimed at preventing the spread of HIV, STIs and TB in the RMI;
- promoting legislative review and implementation on matters related to HIV, STI & TB;
- monitoring the effective implementation of HIV, STI & TB prevention programs across RMI;
- Policy and procedural review and oversight in relation to HIV, STI & TB prevention – and assisting local government and community organizations to effectively implement these policies and procedures;
- Review and oversight of grant proposals, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health;
- Reporting on progress of implementation of the response to the Secretary for Health.

The NAC by laws allow for the provision of three sub-committees to provide direction in relation to health education, legislation and policy, and grants.

Key initiatives underway under the NACs guidance since its establishment include:

- Development of the National Strategic Plan for HIV & STIs, with two workshops held over the last four months; a draft Plan is expected to be circulated to stakeholders by the end of April;
- Scheduling the M&E training and development of the MEF;
- Initiating a review of HIV related legislation in RMI to assess and clarify responsibilities for data collection and reporting; and for the protection of people who are positive.
- Representation at regional high level meetings to discuss RMIs response to HIV and STIs, such as the PIJAAG face to face forum in Honolulu, and the MDG meetings in Bangkok.

### ***2.5 The National HIV & STI Strategy 2013-2017***

In light of the expiry of the 2005-2009 National HIV & STI Strategic Plan, the MOH has collaborated with the NAC and the MOH to review and develop the next National Strategic Plan to address HIV & STIs. As a result, the endorsed National Strategic Plan 2013-2017 is in its implementation phase.

The NAC identified that one of the key barriers to effectively addressing HIV in the Marshall Islands is the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV. The NAC identified that it would

---

<sup>4</sup> Women United Together Marshall Islands, the local NGO which represents grassroots women from across the Marshall Islands; it advocates for gender equity, particularly the empowerment and advancement of women. It has played a key role in the advocacy for legislation protecting women and their families from domestic violence.

draw on both the strengths and address the challenges represented by culture to effectively address HIV in RMI. The development of vigorous and transparent partnerships across government and civil society is intended to be the foundation for a strong response. The membership of the NAC, drawn from government, community NGOs and the private sector and learning institutions, is the first step in developing strong and effective collaborative partnerships.

The Strategy is a multi-sectoral coordinated national response against HIV & STIs that promotes sexual and reproductive health; encourage respect among all individuals, families and the community; and acknowledge the strength of culture.

The main components of the National Strategic Plan include

- strong governance and coordination at local and regional levels, with a particular focus on promoting a strong policy and legislative environment to guide the response;
- comprehensive prevention initiatives to address the delays in promoting effective behavior change at individual family and community levels;
- enhanced quality of treatment, care and support for those living with or affected by HIV and their families, and those infected with STIs; and
- strategic information and communication, to ensure the response is built on a strong foundation of evidence, and informed by ongoing analysis of the situation.

## ***2.6 Monitoring and Evaluation of the National Response***

The national response is currently monitored through routine case surveillance collected by the Ministry of Health's BPPHS clinical teams at the various sites offering counseling and testing and/or referral services at the two major urban centers of Ebeye and Majuro. In addition to the HIV & STI clinics, these include the ANC and Family Planning clinics, the Outpatient clinic and the Outer Islands mobile Outreach services. In addition, Youth to Youth Health Services in Majuro, which also offers counseling and testing (in collaboration with the MOH clinical teams) also records case surveillance data, which it submits to the Ministry of Health.

Quarterly program reports, including data analysis and narrative reporting, are submitted to Bureau heads by the clinical program manager in Majuro. Ebeye submits its data to Majuro for inclusion in the national database. A review of the national reports over 2012-2013 showed that often, data analysis was inconclusive and sometimes, information was repeated across quarters.

Currently, data is entered either by the clinical staff and data encoders at the point of testing or is referred to the IT Department, who, in the absence of dedicated data entry staff, are relied on to respond to all requests for surveillance data.

The other primary source of monitoring and evaluation information is the program reports. Quarterly reports are compiled to meet internal MOH reporting requirements. The internal

reports are the basis of the six monthly and annual reports compiled by MOH in response to compliance with donor funding conditions. These Program reports are routinely requested on a six monthly or annual basis by SPC's Pacific HIV & STI Response Fund and Global Fund; and, for the US Federal funds from CDC and HRSA, on a 6-month interim and annual basis for each of the HIV Prevention, Surveillance and Comprehensive STD Management grants. These reports include surveillance and financial data in addition to narrative comment. A total of 12 reports are required annually to meet all funders' guidelines, but this has changed during CY2013 when CDC has integrated all communicable disease into one funding application that has reduced the number of programmatic reports.

These reports operate under each individual funder's grant cycle, so reports may be due at the same time or consecutively. The reports are comprehensive and sometimes complicated. The SPC reporting format is a new and evolving format released during 2011. CDC has merged their funding opportunities for HIV, STD and TB as well as reporting requirements to one report versus four (4) individual reports.

Few in-depth surveillance surveys or program evaluations were identified during the GAPR process. The last Demographic Health Survey was undertaken by SPC and EPPSO in 2007. While these are often conducted every five years, EPPSO, the office responsible for the last DHS, has no funding to conduct another DHS in the near future. An evaluation of Youth to Youth was reported to be undertaken by SPC Program staff in 2010 but no report has been disseminated to date. Two community NGOs, WUTMI and MIEPI whose work engages the broader issues around vulnerability related to HIV and STIs, demonstrated examples of epidemiological research and qualitative program evaluations in their specific fields, reflecting systemic and rigorous approaches to the collection and analysis of community-level data .The NAC and MOH have developed a monitoring and evaluation framework as part of the National Strategic Plan for HIV and STIs, and is currently being used and monitored by NAC and MOH.

## ***2.7 Funding the National Response***

Funding sources for the national response derive from four key areas.

- There is a substantial contribution from the Compact funds, supporting ongoing MOH staff positions in public health and associated support areas (such as pharmacy, laboratory, and administration finance).
- RMI Health Care Revenue Fund
- US Federal Grant Funds through the CDC and HRSA support HIV prevention and surveillance, comprehensive care for STDs and support to those infected with HIV (specifically under the Ryan White funds).
- The Global Fund, both managed by SPC, are also major sources of funding for the national response in RMI, supporting additional programs and capacity strengthening in governance management and coordination, prevention and access to treatment and care.

As the tables below indicate, grant allocations for 2015 fiscal (and in some grants, calendar) years totaled US\$432,816. Total expenditure across all grants for the same period was recorded as US\$382,747— just over half the possible funds available was expensed. Key areas where funds were available but underutilized included: the Ryan White funds, the HIV Prevention, STD and surveillance grants.

<b>Annual allocations by Year – US\$</b>								
Source: Aggregated data, MOH Finance CY2015								
	US Federal Funds (inc CDC & HRSA)				SPC	Local Fund		Total US\$
	HIV Prevention	Surveillance	STD Management	Ryan White	Global Fund- HIV/STD	RMI Health Care Rev	Indirect Local Fund	
2015	\$175,872	\$17,070	\$118,376	\$35,798	\$15,114*	\$23,700	\$62,000	\$432,816
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$175,872</b>	<b>\$17,070</b>	<b>\$118,376</b>	<b>\$35,798</b>	<b>\$15,114*</b>	<b>\$23,700</b>	<b>\$62,000</b>	<b>\$432,816</b>

\*No disbursement for CY15, roll over funds covered salaries and operations (bank charges)

<b>Estimated expenditure by GARP categories by year<sup>5</sup> US\$</b>				
Source: Aggregated data from MOH Finance 2015				
	Prevention	Care & Treatment	Program management	Total US\$
2015	\$146,799	\$44,304	\$191,644	\$382,747
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$146,799</b>	<b>\$44,304</b>	<b>\$191,644</b>	<b>\$382,747</b>

Youth to Youth In Health (YTYiH) receives support from UNFPA for their Adolescent Health Development program. Discussion with a representative from Youth to Youth indicates that recent communications from UNPFA suggest that funds will be increased as compared to previous years.

<sup>5</sup>These are estimates ONLY, given time and data constraints: SPC funds are allocated to a range of activities to support implementation of National Strategic Plans, and encompassing prevention, including testing and counselling; laboratory infrastructure, drugs and supplies; capacity strengthening across all technical areas; governance, and management. So expenditure from these funds has been estimated to match the respective ‘most likely’ category. In comparison the US Federal funds are dedicated by categories such as HIV Prevention, STD Management or HIV+ support (Ryan White). These more readily lend themselves directly to the GARP categories. A more detailed analysis of funding is recommended



## 2.8 HIV Epidemiology

The number of people reported to be living with HIV in the Marshall Islands remains low. The MOH HIV registry records the cumulative incidence of HIV is 28 cases since the first case was identified on-island in 1984, indicating low level prevalence.

<b>Status of Cumulative HIV Diagnoses, RMI, 1984-2015</b>				
<i>Source: MOH via HIV register</i>				
<b>Sex</b>	<b>Migrate out</b>	<b>Died</b>	<b>Active</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Male</i>	4	6	3	13
<i>Female</i>	1	5	5	11
<i>Unknown</i>	4	0	0	4
<i>Total</i>	9	11	8	28

### Cumulative HIV Cases, 1984-2015

<b>Year</b>	<b>1980's</b>	<b>1990's</b>	<b>2000's</b>	<b>2010's</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Male</b>	1	2	7	2	12
<b>Female</b>	1	1	8	2	12
<b>U/K</b>	4	0	0	0	4
<b>Total</b>	6	3	15	4	28

There were no new cases in 2015. Two new cases were identified in 2014 both of which were not TB/HIV co-infection. Of the 8 people living with HIV, seven are currently on ARV treatment; the eighth has decided to stop ART due to the side effects. All HIV Cases are living in Majuro. There are three males and five are females. The age range of those currently living with HIV on-island is between 21-40 years, with the biggest cluster of four in the 26-30 year age range.

<b>Active Cases by Age Group RMI 2015</b>			
Source: MOH HIV Registry			
<b>Age group(yrs)</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<15	0	0	0
15-19	0	0	0
20-24	0	2	2
25-29	2	1	3
30-34	0	1	1
35-39	1	1	2
40+	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>

Of the 28 cases thus far, heterosexual transmission appears to be the dominant mode in the 25 cases. Mother to child transmission is the next most common mode of transmission.

<b>HIV Cumulative cases by Transmission RMI 1984-2015</b>					
Source MOH HIV Registry					
<b>Sex</b>	<b>Heterosexual</b>	<b>MSM</b>	<b>Drug Users</b>	<b>MTCT</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Male</i>	10	0	0	1	11
<i>Female</i>	10	0	0	1	11
<i>Unknown</i>	4	0	0	0	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>28</b>

Low levels of knowledge and unprotected sexual activity, particularly among young people, is thought to be the most significant risk factor, but there has been little new data since the 2007 Demographic Health Survey, so any shifts in risk factors are not well-documented. Alcohol use

associated with unprotected sexual behaviors, particularly amongst young people, was identified as a significant risk in the 2009 Youth Risk Behaviors Survey, one of the few recent behavioral surveys recently documented<sup>6</sup>.

The recent development of the National Strategic Plan identified mobile people (including local and expatriate travelers), young people, sex workers, seafarers and prisoners as key risk groups.

### **3. NATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE AIDS EPIDEMIC**

#### **Target 1: Reduce sexual transmission of HIV by 50% by 2015**

Many successful initiatives have been occurring in prevention of HIV and STIs. This has included community education and awareness campaigns on a large scale, such as World AIDS Day campaigns, Youth to Youth and Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI) education of young people in and out of schools, and the national campaign to promote chlamydia treatment.

Funding for prevention has been available through, RMI Health Care Revenue, the World Health Organization, the Global Fund and USA Federal funds provided through the Centers for Disease Control.

As a result, there has been an increase in knowledge of risk behaviors, and this has been demonstrated through survey results. However, planning participants noted the need to now focus on support for behavior change, not just knowledge.

There has been safe blood transfusion as a means of preventing transmission of HIV. The increase in knowledge has also resulted in more people being tested voluntarily, with counseling being provided for all people tested in Majuro and Ebeye.

Access to condoms has improved, though there have been some problems with ongoing reliable supply of condoms. This has been a problem especially for outer islands, but stock outs of condoms have also sometimes occurred in Majuro. Condoms are provided within different services of the Majuro Hospital and the Ebeye Health Centre, and condoms are also available in local stores.

There has been some success in addressing the cultural taboos about talking about HIV and STIs. This has included raising awareness in public, talking on the radio, and distributing condoms. People are taught how to use condoms and understand why this is important.

#### **1.1 Percentage of young people aged 15-24 who both correctly identify ways of preventing the sexual transmission of HIV and who reject major misconceptions about HIV transmission\***

*Data from 2006 Youth SGS indicates that 8.4% of males were able to answer all 5 questions on knowledge of HIV prevention correctly while 3.8% of women answered all 5 questions on knowledge of HIV prevention correctly.*

*2007 DHS Survey: 39.4% of men aged 15-24 years demonstrated comprehensive*

---

<sup>6</sup>Youth Risk Behaviours Survey, CDC Atlanta, 2009

*knowledge about AIDS; 26.6% of women aged 15-24 years demonstrated comprehensive knowledge about AIDS. 2007 data suggests a shift – improvement – in the reach and/or quality of prevention education and awareness through 2007. However, SGS survey shows young people’s knowledge of where to get a test or condom is low; but 2007 DHS data suggests higher, but who have got a test and know the results is low*

## **1.2 Percentage of young women and men who have had sexual intercourse before the age of 15**

*From the 2006 SGS 15% of young women and 24.6% of young men have had sex before the age of 15. There remains a high rate of teenage pregnancy, therefore, there are still a high number of young men and women having sexual intercourse without using contraception like a condom.*

*The most recent MOH Annual Report, for the fiscal year 2014, identified a teenage pregnancy rate<sup>7</sup> of 41 teen pregnancies per 1,000 populations less than 20 years old, continuing the decreasing trend of the last four years.*

*Despite the decreasing trend, the teen pregnancy rate is still considered high. Apart from concerns over individual well-being – nearly 19% of births are low weight, and there is a high risk of premature labor, anemia and high blood pressure - the MOH are concerned that these births represent complications for the family, government and teenage mothers (and fathers) such as potential disruptions to schooling and consequences for income-earning potential as well as household over-crowding and associated issues. Family planning services are offered through the Maternal and child health program; and Youth to Youth health clinic offers counseling and contraceptives.*

*Youth friendly health services are offered primarily by Youth to Youth at its clinic in Majuro and in Ebeye. Youth to youth in health has been in operation in Majuro over 15 years and is well-recognized for its contribution to youth health. The service in Ebeye has only recently re-opened, with support from the Ebeye Health Center. YTYiH work with young people in schools, and out of formal school settings.*

*The YTYiH service in Majuro offers STI & HIV counseling and testing, family planning contraceptive distribution, based on choice, and physical examinations for males and females.*

*In addition to clinic services, YTYiH also provides a range of health education and awareness programs, utilizing awareness activities, education sessions, drama, focus groups, peer education and other innovative means to reach audiences as diverse as taxi drivers, sex workers and school students. In addition to providing access to condoms at its clinic location, it also distributes condoms to bars and nightclubs and hotels.*

---

<sup>7</sup> That is, pregnancy occurring in women less than 20 years old

*At the Majuro center, young people can also access a range of IEC materials on health and wellbeing, as well as access to computers for their own research. The Majuro site runs a homework program and an arts program. It also links with the National Training Council to provide life skills and vocational-related training programs.*

**1.3 Percentage of adults aged 15–49 who have had sexual intercourse with more than one partner in the past 12 months**

*2007 DHS survey showed that among those who have had sexual intercourse in the last 12 months: 3.3% of women aged 15-49 who have had sexual intercourse with more than one partner in the last 12 months. 9% of men aged 15-49 who have had sexual intercourse with more than one partner in the last 12 months.*

*2007 DHS survey also provided another (different) measure of high risk sex for 15-24 age group: 38.7% of young women aged 15-24 who have had higher risk sexual intercourse (ie with someone who was neither spouse nor living with the respondent) in the last 12 months. 71.8% of young men aged 15-24 who have had sexual intercourse who have had higher risk sexual intercourse (ie with someone who was neither spouse nor living with the respondent).*

**1.4 Percentage of adults aged 15–49 who had more than one sexual partner in the past 12 months who report the use of a condom during their last intercourse\***

*The Demographic Health Study of 2007 reported that 10.6% of women and 19.5% of men use condom during their last intercourse who had more than one sexual partner in the past 12 months. .*

*No new survey or data has been collected to measure the amount of information young women and men have gained since the 2006 SGS. However, there has been an increase in awareness outreach discussing transmission modes, stigma and discrimination and the misconceptions about HIV.*

**1.5 Percentage of women and men aged 15-49 who received an HIV test in the past 12 months and know their results**

*From the Routine MOH Surveillance Data 86% of men and women aged 15-49 who received an HIV test in the last 12 months and know their results.*

**1.6 Percentage of young people aged 15-24 who are living with HIV\***

*MOH Routine Surveillance Data: 25% of young people aged 15-24 who are living with HIV.*

***Populations at higher risk***

*For sex workers, the noted risks included: multiple and concurrent partners, often without protection; the likelihood of violent or forced sex. Prisoners were identified as a previously un-engaged group that may be at higher risk of HIV exposure due to needle use or male-to-male sex. Taxi drivers and seafarers were a group who were also noted as likely to engage in multiple*

*sex with concurrent partners and without protection. They were also identified as at risk of forced or violent sex and male to male sex. Travelers were similarly seen as a group who may be at risk because of multiple sexual activity with concurrent partners, and without protection.*

*However, there is very little documented research on the size or behaviors of any of these groups in RMI. There are few services specifically targeted at the needs of any of these groups. These groups are expected to access mainstream services. With the shortcomings in the data entry identified earlier, it is difficult to assess how well any of these groups access mainstream services for HIV & STI testing and counseling, or other education and prevention programs.*

*Youth to Youth in health in Majuro and Ebeye are the only group who specifically work with any of these vulnerable groups in a systematic way.*

*YTYiH did attempt to conduct a behavior surveillance study of the sex workers in 2008. However, sex work is an illegal activity in RMI and the steps to progress the study brought unwanted attention on the sex workers, with some subsequently being deported and others disappearing to avoid prosecution. As a result, YTYIH therefore decided to run a number of focus groups with their network of sex workers to identify issues and develop an alternative program.*

*YTYIH are currently funded through the SPC Response Fund to provide education and awareness programs, as well as access to testing and counseling, for sex workers (as well as for taxi drivers). YTYIH reports showed interactions with approximately 50 sex workers over a three month period. No evaluation data was available.*

*The prison population, which is predominantly male, was recently offered STI testing and counseling by the MOH under a grant through the Global Fund. This was the first time this service was offered in the prison. The level of hepatitis identified was significant, generating interest among MOH health care workers that this service should be offered routinely in the prison.*

*Over the last two years, RMI has successfully attracted additional and significant funding to implement programs to address substance abuse. The Single State Agency the government agency with responsibility in this area is responsible for monitoring grants to a number of NGOs who work in prevention and treatment for substance abuse. Representatives from these groups – MIEPI and SSA – were confident that reports of IDU in the recent Youth Risk behavior surveys showed misunderstanding of the questions rather than reflected the practice of IDU. There are no programs operating in this area, although it is acknowledge that prevention needs to be the focus.*

## **Sex Workers**

- 1.7 Percentage of sex workers reached with HIV prevention programmes
- 1.8 Percentage of sex workers reporting the use of a condom with their most recent client
- 1.9 Percentage of sex workers who have received an HIV test in the past 12 months and know their results
- 1.10 Percentage of sex workers who are living with HIV

*There is no data available related to sex workers both within the MOH surveillance data as well as national surveys.*

### ***Men who have Sex with Men***

- 1.11 Percentage of men who have sex with men reached with HIV prevention programmes
- 1.12 Percentage of men reporting the use of a condom the last time they had anal sex with a male partner
- 1.13 Percentage of men who have sex with men that have received an HIV test in the past 12 months and know their results
- 1.14 Percentage of men who have sex with men who are living with HIV

*There is no data available related to sex workers both within the MOH surveillance data as well as national surveys.*

## **Target 2: Reduce transmission of HIV among people who inject drugs by 50% by 2015**

- 2.1 Number of syringes distributed per person who injects drugs per year by needle and syringe programs
- 2.2 Percent of people who inject drugs who report the use of a condom at last sexual intercourse
- 2.3 Percent of people who inject drugs who reported using sterile injecting equipment the last time they injected
- 2.4 Percent of people who inject drugs that have received an HIV test in the last 12 months and know the results
- 2.5 Percent of people who inject drugs who are living with HIV

*There is no data available related to inject drug users within the MOH surveillance. Local knowledge advises no IDU in RMI in contrast to Youth Risk Behavior survey (YRBS) 2009. YRBS 2009 reported 6.4% of students reported use heroin one or more times during their life 9.6% of students reported they took steroid pills or shots without a doctor's prescription one or more times during their life; 11.2% of students report using a needle to inject any illegal drug into their body one or more times during their life. MIEPI & SSA advise that evidence indicates IDU is not present in RMI so this indicator is not applicable. Prevention is an issue though.*

## **Target 3: Eliminate mother to child transmission of HIV by 2015 and substantially reduce AIDS-related neonatal deaths**

- 3.1 Percent of HIV-positive pregnant women who receive anti-retrovirals to reduce the risk of mother to child infection

3.2 Percent of infants born to HIV-positive women receiving a virological test for HIV within two months of birth

3.3 Mother to child transmission of HIV (modeled)

Modelling estimates not reliable given population numbers

*None of current active cases were pregnant during this reporting period. However, when children were born to women diagnosed with HIV in 2010-2011, the guidelines on Prevention of Maternal to Child Transmission were implemented. Rapid tests were taken and confirmatory tests followed. Prophylaxis medicines were available at the Majuro hospital. A pediatrician is a member of the HIV Core Care team at the Majuro hospital. Of those three children born to an HIV+ mother in the last three years, two children were tested with a PCR test (results show a normal or negative PCR), and the third remains to be tested. This demonstrates that the processes work to prevent children being born with HIV.*

*There is not information available about the current situation for the children of those who have been diagnosed as HIV+. Normal cultural practice is that all children who are left without parents will be taken in by other family members. This has led to an assumption that there is little or no negative impact on the children who have already been born to parents living with HIV. However, there is no follow up evidence of what has happened for specific families.*

#### **Target 4: Have 15million people living with HIV on antiretroviral treatment by 2015**

All people living with HIV in the Marshall Islands are entitled to treatment with antiretroviral drugs. RMI's clinical care program is guided by reference to the technical advice generated by CDC and SPC, through its regional partners in Oceanic Society for Sexual Health and HIV Medicine and WHO. The senior clinical care program manager is a member of the OSSHM. OSSHM's guidelines for ART, including eligibility, are available on their website: <http://www.osshhm.org>. A recent update released by WHO in relation to stages for assessment for ART was endorsed and circulated by OSSHM to all members. The Clinical Program Manager advises that the treatment regimens/options (first line) used in RMI are in accord with those identified in the National Guidelines and updated in the 2009 recommended by SPC /OSSHM and WHO<sup>8</sup>.

Adherence, as well as prompt treatment, is a critical area for RMI's treatment and care program. Previously, cases have usually been diagnosed late. At least 11 of the 28 HIV cases recorded have prematurely died due to complications of AIDS. Although most of these deaths are from the 1980s and 1990s, the rate is high. It is important that the MOH understand the factors that led to such a high mortality rate and strengthen its clinical care services. Access to free ARV is one factor which has supported a stronger quality of care as has clinical training.

---

<sup>8</sup> National Guidelines for HIV Care and Prevention, Ministry of Health, October 2007, p21; and supplemented by the Updated Recommendation for Use of Antiretroviral Drugs based on the WHO Rapid Advice documents, November, 2009



Currently, 7 of the 8 people who are living with HIV in RMI are on ART. These seven have been on ART between 1-5 years. Currently, only one HIV+ person discontinued ART during 2015, due to a dislike of the side-effects. Efforts to recommence ART have as yet been unsuccessful. The HIV register indicates that 6 of the 8 have undertaken Cotrimoxazole preventive therapy, prior to, or in parallel to moving on to ART.

RMI's access to ART is financed through the Global Funds regional procurement mechanism, based in Fiji. ART is supplied by the pharmacy in Majuro hospital; and, when needed through the pharmacy in Ebeye hospital.

The one patient who diagnosed with HIV in late 2013 was also TB positive. This client makes a total of three cases who have been HIV-TB co-infected. The most recent case was first treated under the TB protocols and then was believed to have migrated out of country after completing TB medications. Previously, other positive clients have discontinued their treatment due to side-effects, and opting to choose traditional medicines instead. These patients did not survive.

SPC, together with the HAETC, regularly provide updates and advise remotely as well as on-site to the RMI clinical care manager in relation to the care of patients. The North Pacific island countries hold regular case presentations through Skype. Also the clinicians in the US-affiliated Pacific island countries attend the annual scientific meetings on HIV in Hawaii (organized by HAETC) as well as the annual HIV meetings held in Atlanta, Georgia (organized by CDC). While training is one contribution to patient care, exposure to more patients as well as direct in-country clinical mentoring and supervision also enhances patient outcomes.

RMI would benefit from a review of its guidelines and protocols and their implementation.

#### 4.1 Percent of eligible adults and children currently receiving antiretroviral therapy

*88% of eligible adults and children currently receiving antiretroviral therapy*

#### 4.2 Percent of adults and children with HIV known to be on treatment 12 months after initiation of antiretroviral therapy

*There is no new case that started antiretroviral therapy in 2015.*

### **Target 5: Reduce tuberculosis deaths in people living with HIV by 50% by 2015**

#### 5.1 Percent of HIV-positive incident TB cases that received treatment for both TB and HIV

*2015, There is no new co-infection of HIV and TB; but one of the patients relapsed and received TB treatment*

*2014, There is no co-infection of HIV and TB.*

*2013, 100% of HIV-positive incident TB cases that received treatment for both TB and HIV.*

*In the last five years – 3 co-infections in total –previous two cases were diagnosed with HIV first.*

## **Target 6: Reach a significant level of annual global expenditure (US22-23billion) in low and middle income countries**

### 6.1 Domestic and international AIDS spending by categories and financing sources

*See Annex 2*

## **Target 7: Critical Enablers and Synergies with Development Sectors**

### 7.2 Proportion of ever-married or partnered women aged 15-49 who experienced physical or sexual violence from a male intimate partner in the past 12 months

*The Marshall Islands has made greater progress to address the elimination of gender inequalities and gender-based violence. In 2014 alone, the RMI government endorsed the National Gender Equality Policy with first priority outcomes the RMI wants to achieve as a nation, and they are (1) strengthened capacity across the government to deliver gender-responsive programs and services, (2) secured family wellbeing, (3) elimination of gender-based violence and protection and care of survivors, (4) enabling environment for an equitable participation in and benefit from economic development, and (5) equitable participation of women and men in decision-making. Under priority two (2) includes a strategic action to raise awareness and disseminate information about sexual and reproductive health and right and sexual harassment, and this would include HIV/AIDS and STIs awareness.*

*The Ministry of Internal Affairs was awarded the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women three-year grant to ensure the successful implementation of the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act. The grant includes training for law enforcement, school teachers and other staff and faculty, and service providers to better provide the services victims and survivors of violence would need for further protection. In 2014, Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI) was contracted by the national government and with support from the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) to conduct a study, Family Health and Safety Study, to measure the prevalence of violence against women and girls. Findings showed that nearly 70% of women had experience physical, sexual, emotional and/or financial abuse and violence in their lifetime. In regards to sexual abuse, a major risk factor for the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other STIs, about 21% of women have experienced sexual violence by a partner and 13% by a non-partner. The most common acts of sexual violence were forced sexual intercourse. And the proportion of ever married or partnered women aged 15-49 who experienced physical or sexual violence from a male intimate partner in the past 12 months is 20% or 1 in 5 women. 91% of women who experienced partner violence did not seek help from formal services or authorities. In 2015, WUTMI was awarded a grant under the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development Initiative to establish a violence against women and girls support service. The service has a component on HIV and STIs awareness, and assisting victims access medical services and*

*emergency medical treatment. However, it has a limited target group it can provide this assistance to and that is to women and girls 14yrs and older. WUTMI is often the go-to organization for information and support related to gender-based violence. In relation to direct HIV and STIs activities, WUTMI continues to provide support to the Ministry of Health thru the coordination of the National Advisory Committee for HIV, STIs and TB, and conducting awareness outreach.*

*The RMI government received financial support to reinstate the Outer Islands Mobile Team currently known as Wa Kuk Wa Jimor; a household integrated resources management project was established with the main goal of improving quality life in the outer islands by providing updated and relevant information on health, economic, social and cultural issues to individual Marshallese citizens, liaise between the national and local government on needs or developments for each atolls or communities, and providing logistical and technical support to the local governments and non-government partners with their development projects. The project utilizes a curriculum that teach how the population affects the health and environment, human reproductive anatomy, human fertility, STIs/HIV and Family Planning. The visits and sessions conduced concluded that there was major lack of information and knowledge on reproductive health and family planning, on birth contraception, on the reproductive anatomy, and that the only ones who had some knowledge were those women and girls who were/are using some form of family planning method. A pre and post-test were conducted to measure knowledge and these tests showed a dramatic increase in the level of understanding and knowledge on each module of the curriculum. The Wa Kuk Wa Jimor is a continued effort.*

*The Youth to Youth in Health is a recipient of a multi-million-dollar Teenage Pregnancy Prevention grant which includes HIV and STIs awareness and counseling services, and the establishment of a reproductive health school curriculum.*

*Stat: Proportion of ever married or partnered women aged 15-49 who experienced physical or sexual violence from a male intimate partner in the past 12 months  
1 in 5 (20%)*

## **Target 8: Eliminating Stigma & Discrimination**

### **8.1 Discriminatory attitudes towards people living with HIV**

*There haven't been any activities to promote, develop, and amend laws and policies. However, there have been an increase in awareness outreach to reduce stigma and discrimination and to raise the level of understanding on human rights. There is no new data to state whether there has been an increase or decrease in discriminatory attitudes towards people living with HIV.*

*Stat: Percentage of women and men aged 15-49 who report discriminatory attitudes towards people living with HIV No new data*

## **4. Best Practices**

*A number of key steps have been taken over the last two years to contribute to a stronger and more effective response to HIV & STIs in the Marshall Islands.*

### **4.1 Governance and Program Management**

This is an area where RMI has made continuous progress since the last country progress report. RMI now has a functioning and representative NAC with a supportive secretariat in place. Since its inauguration in November 2011, the NAC have

- Initiated a review of the previous national strategic plan
- Revised and completed RMI 2013-2017 national strategic plan on HIV/STI's
- Developed and have already implemented M&E activities for RMI NSP 2013-2017
- Initiated discussions to review the current legislation relating to key areas of the response – particularly the protection of positive people from stigma and discrimination and the development of legislation governing data sharing and reporting.

Its engagement has stimulated far stronger and broader representation from within the Ministry of health as well as across civil society. As an example, whereas meetings to discuss the national strategic plan in 2010 attracted 5-6 people, the recent national strategic planning workshop attracted 20-30 people, with representation from most relevant programs within the Ministry of health and from many civil society organizations. The representation of the legal counsel and his staff during the National Strategic Planning workshop was an excellent example of stronger engagement with different sectors who can contribute to a strong and vigorous response.

In addition to this, the leadership within the Ministry has demonstrated strong and vigorous approach to address outstanding program management issues in relation to under-expenditure and program reporting to re-establish the financial strength of the program.

The challenges for the NAC and ministry will be to maintain this level of engagement. Open and transparent communication, continuing strong leadership and the demonstration of equitable access to resources will assist.

### **4.2 A Supportive Policy Environment**

As noted above, steps are now in train to establish a supportive policy and legislative environment through the review of the current legislative environment in relation to HIV and the protection of human rights in the Marshall Islands.

This will need to be complemented by a review of the national guidelines for HIV Care and Protection. These were first drafted in 2007 and are intended for review every two years.

### ***4.3 Scale-up of Prevention Programs***

The allocation of resources and establishment of partnerships under the Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment grants awarded through the US Federal Department of Health and Human Services/Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services will have an influence on the vulnerability of key groups in the population. This will influence capacity to prevent HIV and STI transmission.

Although not directly arising from the leadership of the HIV & STI response, the establishment of partnerships, alongside the allocation of resources, between the Single State Agency for Substance Abuse and a number of community NGOs and coalitions is having, and is forecast to have, a substantial impact on the level of NGO engagement in areas related to reducing vulnerability to HIV and STIs arising from alcohol-related risk settings, or gender-related risk factors.

Similarly, the leadership demonstrated by WUTMI in its advocacy around gender violence and the establishment of legislation to protect families from domestic violence represents a powerful role model for others across the community and in Government to take inspiration.

In Ebeye, the Health Center has provided consistent examples which demonstrate the link between the clinical care provided through the health center and the community through the ongoing role of ‘zone’ volunteers and community leaders to support activities, such as contact tracing and community engagement on the presumptive treatment campaign. The Health Center’s capacity to engage with traditional and church leaders to ensure community support for the presumptive treatment campaign is an impressive example of partnership and collaboration to improve the health of the community. It demonstrates the importance of strong relationships built on open communication and trust.

These are important and substantial examples of the strength and capacity generated by ‘kumiti’ - the capacity generated when individuals, working together, catalyse and advocate for change. An effective response will need to work from this foundation.

### ***4.4 Scale-up of Care, Treatment and/or Support Programs***

With continuing low numbers of people reported to be living with HIV, the important issue for treatment care and support in RMI is that the quality of care for those currently diagnosed and their families, is established and maintained. In the past, ongoing adherence to ART medication has clearly been an issue for the clinical care of positive clients. The current situation, where 7 of 8 positive clients maintain compliance with the medication, is a positive sign of improvement.

### ***4.5 Monitoring and Evaluation***

Given the low reported numbers of positive people in the Marshall Islands, and the high rates of other STIs, the link between education, screening, testing and diagnosis across all STIs cannot be

underestimated. With clinic resources stretched, it is important to know whether the right people are being reached with screening and treatment. It is important that the surveillance data is adequately and accurately captured and then able to be analyzed to enhance program improvement.

The epi-analysis of 2009 and 2010 surveillance undertaken by the Ebeye Health Center, drawing on the resources of CDC, is an excellent example of how analysis of routine case surveillance can assist with program improvement. It provides insight into the kinds and levels of risk behaviors amongst those screened, which can inform choices around which groups to target in the future.

The advent of a new reporting template which encourages data to be capture in a way which monitors whether those who are routinely screened are diagnosed and treated, is a great advance. The collaboration of SPC and CDC in creating a template that is easy to understand and use is commended.

It is recommended that Youth to Youth also consider carefully how they capture data generated through their grant to promote CTR in the Outer islands and perhaps liaise with Ebeye and CDC or SPC to identify support.

## ***5. Major Challenges and Gaps***

The 2015 Country Progress report identified a number of key challenges in three key areas: treatment care and support; data collection and resources.

### ***5.1 Treatment Care and Support***

The situation in relation to the 2015 Country Progress report's recommendations on Treatment Care and Support:

- With 7 of the 8 patients living with HIV currently maintaining their compliance with ART treatment regimen, this indicates an improvement in aspects of treatment care and support. However, the case review of current cases to build a stronger appreciation of the link between education, screening and diagnosis has not been undertaken.
- The national guidelines have not been reviewed; this remains a need as they have now been in place for five years.
- There is still a need to improve access to services in the Outer islands: Youth to Youth in Health are looking forward to taking the opportunity to build a baseline of the current situation in relation to HIV and STI status through their grant to offer testing and counseling services to a number of outer islands in 2015.
- There is recognition of the need to engage positive people in all aspects of the response; the strong focus on addressing stigma and discrimination in the forthcoming National

Strategic Plan is seen as a critical platform to address this and break through some of the barriers to positive people's meaningful involvement.

## **5.2 Data Collection**

There has been some standardization of HIV and STI data collection and reporting, but this is not universal. There is a need to strengthen data collection, analysis and sharing of information.

There is not consistent use of the same indicators across all programs. There is a need to strengthen leadership, communication and coordination of Monitoring and Evaluation.

Most of the national HIV database is with the national Program Manager for the HIV and STI program. The identification of data for the Global AIDS Progress Report indicators revealed that this data base is inconsistent and incomplete. There is currently no dedicated staff to support HIV and STI surveillance data entry, analysis and reporting in Majuro, so the task rests with the staff currently delivering clinical programs. Workload sometimes precludes accurate and timely entry of data

## **5.3 Resources**

Funding and resources are inconsistent. There is a need for more resources to support outreach, client follow up and contact tracing, including access to a vehicle and staff. There are not enough health care providers in Ebeye. There are still some shortages of some supplies. For example, test kits and vaccines are slower to reach Ebeye due to shipping from Majuro.

Marshall Islands Social Security (MISSA) support is one mechanism which is available to provide benefits to assist those who are sick and disabled. The physician who examines all applicants for MISSA purposes has not identified anyone who has cited HIV as the reason for their disability application.

The Marshall Islands is a Sub-Recipient for Global Fund grants, which means that supplies of antiretroviral medicines are ordered through the regional Fiji Pharmaceuticals (FPCC), linked to SPC. SPC's HIV Program works alongside the FPCC to purchase medications for the Marshall Islands. On a six monthly basis a supply inventory is submitted to FPCC; supplies usually take 1-2 weeks to reach the Marshall Islands. However, medicines were sometimes not available because either the accounts were not paid or the paperwork was not completed.

Resources to fully staff community service organization facilities are an ongoing concern. The Youth to Youth clinic is still awaiting a full time nurse from the Ministry of Health so that the clinic can be open every day instead of the current 8 hours per week. Providing services to the outer islands remains a major challenge.

## **6. Recommendations**

### **6.1 Program Management**

The adjustments in leadership, including the establishment of the NAC, over the last year have clearly had an impact on the level of support for the HIV & STI program within the Ministry and in the broader community.

The establishment of links to the civil society sector through the engagement of WUTMI as a liaison and secretariat on behalf of the MOH and the NAC is a positive step.

The Ministry is to be encouraged to continue to provide this level of engagement and support to the response. It is important that the Ministry continue to provide supportive and far-sighted leadership. Financial and human resources need to continue to be dedicated to support the program.

The engagement of civil society, as well as the government health workforce, in the response needs to be encouraged. The Ministry, as well as the NAC, need to prioritize open and transparent communication on the response and its effectiveness to all stakeholders to maintain their interest and stimulate their ongoing enthusiasm.

### **6.2 Policy & Coordination**

The NAC has initiated important steps towards creating a supportive policy and legislative environment to protect the rights of those who are positive. It needs to be supported by agreement on what rights are to be protected, and how these rights are critical to an effective response to HIV.

It is suggested that the recommendations of the RRRT Review of HIV, Human Rights and the Law be reviewed and implemented as pertinent. The NAC should continue to take an active role in supporting this review. It should set a timeframe for the review and agree on an implementation plan for establishing effective legislation to protect those who are infected or affected by HIV from stigma and discrimination on the basis of status, sex, sexual orientation or gender.

A rights-based approach to HIV also needs to be monitored. This can be resource-intensive. It also needs to be clearly impartial. The recent submissions to the Human Rights Council working group for the universal periodic review of Human Rights proposed that a regional mechanism for monitoring human rights be instituted. This would maximize expertise and resources and promote impartiality. It is suggested that the NAC consider its support for this proposal and, if so, identify ways to encourage its establishment.



### ***6.3 Prevention, knowledge and behavior change***

The most recent survey of knowledge and behavior in relation to HIV and STIs is the 2007 DHS survey undertaken by EPPSO. The DHS concluded that there was substantial disconnect between knowledge of HIV transmission and prevention and the level of unprotected sexual activity. This is more pronounced for women, with nearly twice as many women not using condom during last sex, high risk sex or first sex. With the majority of Marshallese young men and women reporting sexual activity before they turned 18 years, and very few reporting use of a condom during first sexual activity. While knowledge of HIV is high, safer behaviors are reported to be low. The DHS recommended that different strategies, including a greater focus on behavior change, are needed.

The DHS report of 2007 also raised a challenge in relation to teenage pregnancy. Although admitting to considerable improvements have occurred in lowering RMI fertility from 7.2 to 4.5 live births, it noted that teenage fertility has remained almost unchanged – and high compared to regional standards. The DHS 2007 data suggested that one in four girls and young women aged 15-19 was either pregnant or had already given birth to her first child. The high proportion, plus the marked difference between rural (43%) and urban (20%) Marshallese suggests that there may be a strong cultural acceptance. The report raised the challenge that promoting education on Sexual and Reproductive Health, including HIV education, is insufficient in itself to establish change.

It is recommended that the NAC seriously consider identifying and undertaking specific program evaluations of the key prevention programs that have been in operation over the last five years since the 2007 DHS survey to assess their effectiveness and identify opportunities for improvement.

### ***6.4 HIV Testing and Counseling***

This is a key focal area for the forthcoming national strategy. It is important that these services are effective. Based on the available data, we do not know:

- how accessible counseling and testing services are;
- how well services are accessed;
- how well services maintain privacy and confidentiality – or are able to facilitate follow-up, particularly in relation to partner or contact tracing.

We do know that data in relation to counseling and testing is poorly maintained and difficult to access. A review of testing and counseling services and policies is recommended.

### ***6.5 Care, Treatment and Support:***

With continuing low numbers of people reported to be living with HIV, the important issue for treatment care and support in RMI is that the quality of care for those currently diagnosed and

their families. As with prevention, a review of the quality and access to care and treatment services is recommended to identify opportunity for improvement.

## **6.6 Financing**

Clearly, the disparity between the level of funds available to RMI to support the response and its capacity to spend these funds is disappointing, especially in light of the level of demand for additional resources from parts of civil society to enhance capacity in areas such as testing and counseling services for youth or research into more effective prevention strategies.

It is acknowledged that the Ministry of Health has recognized this as a serious issue and is taking steps to address this disparity. The recruitment of additional support through WUTMI to maximize engagement with the civil society organizations is supported.

In addition to a stronger leadership of the program, it is also suggested that the response would benefit from a review of financial expenditure patterns in light of program reach and effectiveness to identify specific areas for improvement. Given that some areas of shortfalls are already apparent – such as those under the Ryan White program, it is also recommended that such a review be immediately undertaken of the support currently provided for people living with HIV and their families, so that additional programming can be identified and implemented.

## **6.7 Human Resources**

While most programs might seek support for additional staff resources, the absence of data on which the NAC can draw its own conclusions about the effectiveness of the responses suggests that identifying and supporting resources for ongoing monitoring and evaluation, including surveillance is a priority.

## **6.8 Monitoring & Evaluation and Surveillance**

The GAPR process clearly identified ongoing shortcomings in the way data is collected, analyzed and reported. This was an issue in 2015 and it remains an issue now. This issue must be addressed as a priority.

The Ministry of Health needs to decide on the level of priority it wants to give to systems to support the systematic collection and analysis of data and allocate the resources to ensure it is effectively and routinely undertaken. This applies to routine case surveillance and to program evaluations.

The NAC has recognized the importance of understanding what data to collect and how: it has initiated steps to develop and implement reporting legislation in relation to data sharing on HIV. This is supported.

The jointly-developed CDC and SPC routine surveillance template is an excellent example of collaboration which provides stronger guidance on what data is useful to collect and how to

collect it in ways which promotes analysis for program improvement. This should be expanded and continued.

Support for the establishment of the HIV reporting legislation is encouraged. In addition, there needs to be support for additional and dedicated staff and systems, to support stronger and more rigorous systems for data collection analysis and program evaluation. The strengths represented by MIEPI, as a local stakeholder with capacity in this area, could be explored. Perhaps a sub-contracting arrangement to the NAC to assist with either capacity building and/or implementation of the monitoring and evaluation framework, including the maintenance of routine surveillance, could be canvassed.

### ***7. Support from the Country's Development Partners (if applicable)***

The Marshall Islands received technical assistance, including capacity strengthening, from multiple agencies across the Pacific and the USA, from international donor agencies, technical agencies as well as international NGOs.

### ***8. Monitoring and evaluation environment***

The national response is currently monitored through routine case surveillance collected by the Ministry of Health's BPPHS clinical teams at the various sites offering counseling and testing and/or referral services at the two major urban centers of Ebeye and Majuro. In addition to the HIV & STI clinics, these include the ANC and Family Planning clinics, the Outpatient clinic and the Outer Islands Outreach services. In addition, Youth to Youth Health Services in Majuro, which also offers counseling and testing (in collaboration with the MOH clinical teams) also records case surveillance data, which it submits to the Ministry of Health.

Data in relation to HIV case surveillance is collected through four different forms:

- The STI Case Record form, capturing a patient's personal details and reason for examination as well as behavioral information in relation to sexual risk behaviors, contact partners and treatment plan.
- The RMI HIV informed consent form, confirming that the patient has voluntarily given their consent to the test for HIV antibodies and reassuring of confidentiality procedures; this form also asks for the reason for the test and modes of transmission.
- The Pacific Islands HIV Test Form, noting patient personal details and testing history, test results and risk factors. This form is also referred to as the Counseling Testing and Referral (CTR) form.

Quarterly program reports, including data analysis and narrative reporting, are submitted to Bureau heads by the clinical program manager in Majuro. Ebeye submits its data to Majuro for inclusion in the national database.

The other primary source of monitoring and evaluation information is the program reports. Quarterly reports are compiled to meet internal MOH reporting requirements. The internal reports are the basis of the six monthly and annual reports compiled by MOH in response to compliance with donor funding conditions. These Program reports are routinely requested on a six monthly or annual basis by the Global Fund; and, for the US Federal funds from CDC and HRSA, on a 6-month interim and annual basis for each of the HIV Prevention, Surveillance and Comprehensive STD Management grants. These reports include surveillance and financial data in addition to narrative comment. A total of 12 reports are required annually to meet all funders' guidelines. However, for FY2013, CDC has integrated all communicable disease programs which has significantly reduced the number of programmatic reports.

Few in-depth surveillance surveys or program evaluations were identified during the GAPR process. The last Demographic Health Survey was undertaken by SPC and EPPSO in 2007. Whilst these are often conducted every five years, EPPSO, the office responsible for the last DHS, has no plans to conduct another DHS in the near future.

An evaluation of Youth to Youth was reported to be undertaken by SPC Program staff in 2010 but report has not been shared to MOH. Two community NGOs, WUTMI and MIEPI whose work engages the broader issues around vulnerability related to HIV and STIs, demonstrated examples of epidemiological research and qualitative program evaluations in their specific fields, reflecting systemic and rigorous approaches to the collection and analysis of community-level data.

The NAC and MOH are currently implementing monitoring and evaluation framework, but have realized that there needs to be more frequent meetings to monitor progress and update understanding on data collection.

## **ANNEXES**

### ***ANNEX 1: Consultation/preparation process for the country report on monitoring the progress towards the implementation of the 2011 Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS***

The focal points from Government and NGO sector agreed on a work plan for data collection, analysis and submission of the report. A small working group was nominated, and key contact points identified.

Four key processes for data collection were agreed:

- A review of program reports, including any evaluations or other assessments on the response.
- Review of all surveillance data for inclusion in the indicators table
- Collation and analysis of financial data for inclusion in the Funding matrix

The focal point for government and the NGO sector liaise with a range of stakeholders to collect and forward program reports to the consultant for review.

Two validation meetings (face-face) were held with three key groups of stakeholders from the NGO Sector, Government, and those from the NGO and Government and private sectors who might be able to contribute to completion of the survey or the indicators. The Focal points chaired these meetings. The validation meeting for government sectors took place which the RMI Global AIDS Progress Report FY2015 was presented.

## ***ANNEX 2: National Funding Matrix***

Emailed to [aidsspending@unaids.org](mailto:aidsspending@unaids.org)