

SPEECH BY PREMIER DR PHOPHI RAMATHUBA ON THE OCCASION
OF THE 36TH PROVINCIAL WORLD AIDS DAY COMMEMORATION,
MARAPONG. LEPHALALE

01 December 2024

Programme Director,
MEC for COGHSTA, Mr Basikopo Makamu,
MEC for Social Development, Ms Florence Radzilani,
MEC for Education, Ms Mavhungu Lerule Ramakhanya,
MEC for Agriculture and Rural Development, Ms Nakedi Kekana,
MEC for Health, Ms Dieketseng Mashego,
MEC for LEDET, Ms Tshitereke Matibe,
MEC for Transport and Community Safety Ms Violet Mathye,
MEC for Treasury, Mr Kgabo Mahoai,
MEC for Public Works, Roads and Infrastructure, Mr Ernest Rachoene,
MEC for Sports Arts and Culture, Mr Jerry Maseko,
Speaker of Limpopo Legislature, Ms Makoma Makhurupetje,
Deputy Speaker of Limpopo Legislature, Ms Tebogo Mamorobela,
Waterberg District Executive Mayor Cllr Jack Maeko,
Lephalale Municipality Mayor Cllr Aaron Mokgetle,
Limpopo Salga Chairperson, Cllr John Mpe,
Traditional Leaders,
Co. Chairperson of the Limpopo AIDS Council, Dr Kholofelo Monyela,
Representatives of civil society,

Members of the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC), community leaders, healthcare workers, and the people of Limpopo,

Thobela, Ndi Matsheloni, Avuxeni, Good Morning, Goeie More

Today, as we gather for the 36th World AIDS Day commemoration under the theme “Equal Rights, Equal Care,” we are reminded of our shared responsibility to combat the HIV and AIDS epidemic. This theme resonates deeply with our commitment to providing dignified, equitable healthcare services to all, in line with the principles of Universal Health Coverage and the National Health Insurance (NHI) model.

Programme Director, World AIDS Day, that was first observed in 1988, is not only a day of reflection but also a call to action. It is an opportunity for us to reaffirm our solidarity with those living with HIV, honor those who have succumbed to AIDS-related illnesses, and recognize the progress we have made.

As South Africa celebrates 30 years of democracy and 20 years of free antiretroviral therapy (ART), we take pride in having the largest HIV treatment program in the world. Yet, we acknowledge the significant challenges that remain, particularly in marginalized and vulnerable communities.

Limpopo, like the rest of South Africa, is aligned with global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.3, which aims to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. Our provincial response is guided by the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets, which seek to ensure that 95% of people living with HIV know their status, 95% of those diagnosed are on treatment, and 95% of those on treatment achieve viral suppression. While Limpopo has made commendable strides, we must confront the reality that we are still lagging behind.

Programme Director, the latest statistics show that 88.6% of people living with HIV in our province know their status, 90.5% of those diagnosed are on treatment, and 90% of those on treatment have achieved viral suppression. Although these figures are slightly below the national average, we take encouragement from the progress made in specific groups. For instance, individuals aged 50 years and older, as well as those in urban areas, have exceeded the third target, with viral suppression rates of 97.2%.

We must ensure that no one is left behind in our fight against HIV and AIDS. This includes intensifying our efforts to reach young people, women, and rural communities, where the challenges are most pronounced. Recent data from the Thembisa model shows improvement in our province's treatment retention rates, which increased from 79.3% to 88.7% within a single reporting period. These gains demonstrate that with consistent effort and investment, we can achieve better outcomes.

The U=U (Undetectable = Untransmittable) campaign is a game-changer in the fight against stigma and discrimination. It emphasises that individuals living with HIV, who adhere to their antiretroviral treatment and achieve an undetectable viral load, cannot transmit the virus to their partners. This knowledge empowers people living with HIV to take control of their health and live fulfilling lives, free from fear and prejudice.

Programme Director, Stigma, and discrimination, however, remain significant barriers. Too many individuals are still hesitant to seek care due to fear of judgment. This undermines our collective response to the epidemic.

As a province, we must encourage an environment where everyone feels safe to access healthcare without fear of discrimination. This is why today's theme, "Equal Rights, Equal Care," is so crucial, it calls on us to address

inequalities, uphold human rights, and provide dignified healthcare for all, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status.

This year, we are also launching the Provincial Implementation Plan, recently approved by the Executive Council, which will guide our efforts in scaling up HIV prevention, treatment, and care services. Our focus includes increasing the availability of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), particularly in districts like Waterberg and Sekhukhune, which have high HIV incidence rates but low PrEP uptake.

Waterberg District, our host for today's commemoration, has the highest HIV incidence in the province at 2.6%, followed by Mopani at 2%. These statistics remind us of the urgent need to invest in prevention interventions, such as consistent condom use, regular testing, and community education. Over seven million condoms have been distributed in Waterberg alone, yet we must continue to encourage their correct and consistent use.

Ladies and gentlemen, our young people, especially adolescent girls and young women, remain disproportionately affected by HIV. We must empower them with knowledge about their sexual and reproductive health rights and provide access to youth-friendly services, including family planning, STI screening, and HIV prevention methods like PrEP.

Substance abuse is another challenge we must address, as it increases the risk of risky sexual behavior, weakens the immune system, and disrupts treatment adherence. Additionally, we must continue to combat gender-based violence, which is both a cause and consequence of HIV infection.

As we reflect on our progress, let us not forget that treatment adherence remains key to controlling the epidemic. When individuals adhere to their medication schedules, they can suppress the virus, improve their health,

and achieve U=U. This is a message we must amplify in every corner of Limpopo.

Let me also take a moment to commend the healthcare workers, civil society organizations, and community leaders who have been at the forefront of our province's response to HIV and AIDS. Your dedication has saved countless lives and brought us closer to our goals.

Ladies and gentlemen,

World AIDS Day reminds us that we are all in this together. Together, we can end HIV and AIDS as a public health threat. Together, we can ensure equal rights and equal care for all. Let us commit ourselves to this mission with renewed vigor, knowing that the health and well-being of our communities depend on it.

I thank you.