

# Implementing Safe and Ethical Index Testing Services: Adapting Provider Referral Contact Tracing Method to Suit Client And Provider Needs in the Western Region of Ghana



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## Background

Index testing, or tracing the sexual and biological contacts of people with HIV, helps break the chain of HIV transmission and facilitates epidemic control. However, stigma, discrimination, and fear of intimate partner violence inhibit disclosure of HIV status to sexual partners and children. Assuring and maintaining the confidentiality of index clients is critical to enhance contact elicitation, tracing, and testing, and follow-up.

## Response

The USAID Strengthening the Care Continuum Project, implemented by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc., trained health care providers from 43 facilities in Western Region of Ghana to support clients to notify and contact their sexual partners and biological children under 19 years of age to test for HIV. The project also reviewed index testing register data for completed index referrals. Due to sociocultural difficulties with partner notification approaches, the project introduced the adapted provider-assisted strategy: giving client contacts' addresses to community-based organizations to anonymously trace and conduct HIV testing within the community, the workplace, and social networks.

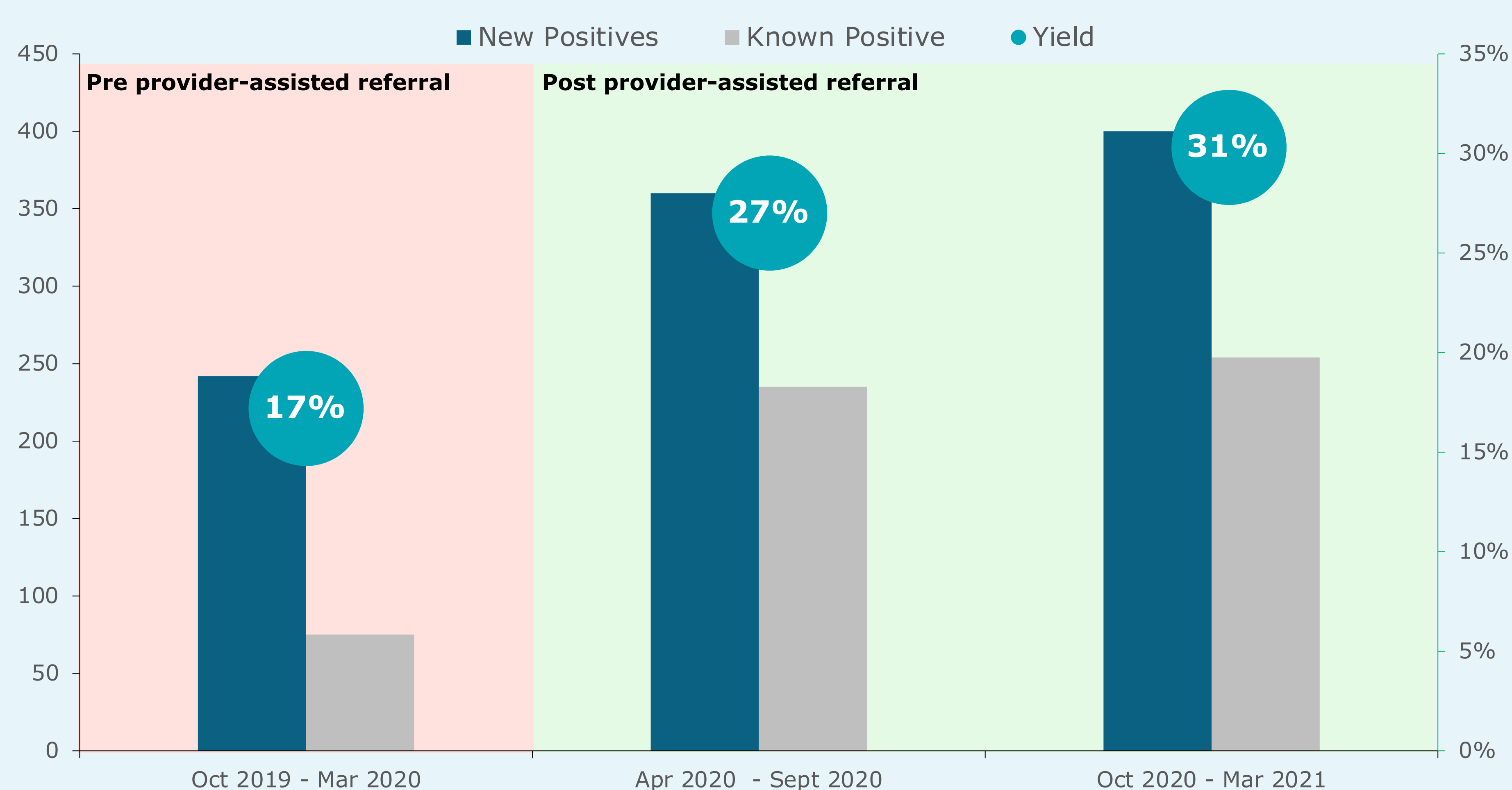
## Results

A review of index testing registers showed that about 70% of clients selected passive referral, for which contacts elicited need to visit the health facility for testing. Sexual partners, in particular, did not show up for testing or may not have been informed by their HIV-positive partners who they needed to test. Under the provider-assisted strategy, providers had difficulties informing HIV-exposed contacts by phone because they feared exposing the identity of the index client.

The **adapted provider-assisted strategy** resulted in biannual increase of 15% in contact test; 65% increase in new index positives identified; and 80% increase in index testing yield.

Between April 2020 and March 2021, 760 new positive and 489 known positive clients of 4,356 tested every six month compared to the pre-intervention results of 296 new and 75 known positive of 1,848 tested between October 2019 and March 2020.

## Improved Index Testing Results using Provider-Assisted Referral



## Conclusion

The adapted provider-assisted strategy is appropriate in situations where the risk of partner violence, stigma, discrimination, and other adverse events is high. When health care workers maintain the confidentiality of index clients and trace elicited contacts anonymously, high contact tracing and testing rates are achieved.