

## From volunteers to vital forces: The untapped power of barangay health workers in curbing HIV in the Philippines

Janet Alexis A. De los Santos<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The Philippines is currently facing an alarming rise in HIV cases, becoming one of the global hotspots, despite international trends showing a decline. One of the critical challenges is the lack of accessible health services, particularly in rural areas, where HIV hubs are scarce and concentrated only in cities. The country also struggles with a shortage of healthcare workers, especially in community health. While Barangay Health Workers (BHWs) are available and are trained volunteers within local communities, they remain underutilized in the government's HIV response. Empowering and training BHWs could be key to bridging the health manpower gap, especially in underserved areas. By involving BHWs in grassroots-level health promotion, HIV awareness, and prevention strategies, the Philippines could significantly improve access to care and community resilience, especially in remote regions where traditional health workers are overwhelmed. This paper highlights the potential of BHWs to become pivotal in addressing the HIV crisis through a decentralized and community-based approach.

**Keywords:** Barangay Health Workers, Community-based approach, Empowerment, HIV, Philippines, Public Health Nursing

**Received:** 3 December 2024  
**Revised:** 5 December 2024  
**Accepted:** 10 December 2024  
**Published:** 11 December 2024



© The authors. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

<sup>1</sup>College of Nursing, Visayas State University, Baybay City, Leyte 6521, Philippines

\*Corresponding Author. Address: College of Nursing, Visayas State University, Baybay City, Leyte 6521, Philippines; Email: janetalexis.delossantos@vsu.edu.ph

The Philippines is facing an urgent and escalating HIV crisis, being identified as a hotspot of new HIV cases in the world after African countries (UNAIDS 2023). While global trends show a decrease in cases, the Philippines has been struggling to make significant progress in its mitigation and control efforts, with cases continuing to grow exponentially over the last two decades (DOH 2024, Montegricono et al 2024). The need for action is clear. Several authors have called for an increase in the number of institutions, such as HIV hubs and health workforces, that can offer direct client care in this sector (Gangcuangco 2019). What the country needs to seriously consider is decentralizing the services it offers regarding HIV across the country with an aim at improving accessibility to health, especially in the desolated and far-flung areas. In fact, in the Philippines, the hubs are located primarily in big cities. Therefore, it is quite difficult for people from rural areas to gain access to health services and obtain necessary medical attention.

The Philippines' health system is grappling with a significant shortage of manpower. In its efforts to combat HIV, particularly in community health, it's ironic that the country's numerous volunteer health workers in the local units, known as Barangay Health Workers (BHWs), are underutilized and lack empowerment. The Philippines adopted the primary health care framework of the Alma Ata Conference in 1978 to reduce health disparities and accelerate promotive and preventive primary health care in the smallest local units in the community by creating a frontline health workforce through the BHWs (Yamaguchi et al 2023). These BHWs, who are trained volunteers from their local communities, provide health promotion and surveillance activities and refer sick clients to their health centers or higher medical institutions, among other duties (Baliola et al 2023). However, their potential to assist local communities, especially in HIV mitigation, is not fully realized.

In most cases, BHWs are considered second-class health workers or often only as auxiliary support service providers stationed in health centers. Despite their long service in their community and the updates and training they receive, most BHWs' potential remains underutilized since their actions and strategies are dependent upon the discretion of the next higher rank. For instance, they may have innovative ideas in community health promotion however, they lack the empowerment to implement them. That is nonetheless the truth: BHWs carry untapped potential as complementary partners with the health team in promoting health, preventing illness, and service delivery, especially in underserved areas in the country.

When trained and empowered, BHWs are in the best position to cascade correct and relevant information to their local constituents. As volunteers, they are readily available to implement health strategies in their local setting that could best serve the interest of mitigating HIV in the country through a grassroots approach. It is a game-changer strategy because, being locals in their respective communities, they will be able to lead their youths, influence family constituents to increase awareness of the dynamics of HIV, and communicate with their children more openly. This is a hopeful revolution in the fight against HIV, especially in underserved areas where traditional health professionals are often overworked and overwhelmed by the ratio of population under their care, and the various health programs they must implement under their watch.

Barangay Health Workers (BHWs) have the potential to play a significant role in reaching remote communities in the Philippines. They could become our allies in disseminating accurate information to increase awareness, improve attitudes, and strengthen health resilience. BHWs have the potential to bridge the health

## From volunteers to vital forces

manpower gap in the fight against the HIV crisis in the Philippines, offering practical solutions in an otherwise challenging situation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author acknowledges the funding support of the Department of Science and Technology (DOST-PCHRD) for funding her study, which was instrumental in the development of the insights and perspectives in this article.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All content herein in this article is solely conceptualized and written by the author.

## FUNDING SOURCE

No fund was utilized in writing this article.

## AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

None to declare

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

This manuscript adheres to ethical standards in the development and presentation of its content. No human participants, animals, or sensitive data were involved in the study, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines.

## COMPETING INTEREST

The author declares no competing interests regarding the authorship, content, or publication of this article.

## REFERENCES

- Baliola M, Golpe M & Advincula-Lopez L. 2023. Gains and challenges of the Baranggay Health Worker (BHW) program during COVID-19 in selected cities in the Philippines. *Journal of Health Research* 38(1):57-68
- Department of Health (DOH). 2024. HIV & AIDS surveillance of the Philippines Jan-Mar 2024. Epidemiology Bureau [cited 2024 Oct 24]. Available from: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yD0D9ztEhDf4gOpgqSI7ykEmdilfqTbb/view?fbclid=IwY2xjawFjmx1leHRuA2FlbQlxMAABHaZ2jujB2mrg-GCbI9491QhNR0tZhmOpW9UVYXHA05XnCidh-qfqvoqGNw\\_aem\\_oYZ4KW0cOezDeaCTom0m-w](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yD0D9ztEhDf4gOpgqSI7ykEmdilfqTbb/view?fbclid=IwY2xjawFjmx1leHRuA2FlbQlxMAABHaZ2jujB2mrg-GCbI9491QhNR0tZhmOpW9UVYXHA05XnCidh-qfqvoqGNw_aem_oYZ4KW0cOezDeaCTom0m-w)
- Ganguangco LMA. 2019. HIV crisis in the Philippines: urgent actions needed. *Lancet Public Health* 4(2). [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(18\)30265-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(18)30265-2)
- Montegricono J, Lee JM & De Los Santos JAA. 2024. A 13-year trend analysis of HIV epidemiology in the Philippines (2010 to 2022). *Journal on Community Health Nursing* 41(4):226-40. doi: 10.1080/07370016.2024.2365146

- UNAIDS. UNAIDS data 2023 [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2024 Oct 24]. Available from: [https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/data-book-2023\\_en.pdf](https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/data-book-2023_en.pdf)
- Yamaguchi Y, Palileo-Villanueva LM, Tubon LS, Mallari E & Matsuo H. 2023. The experiences of community health workers in preventing noncommunicable diseases in an urban area, the Philippines: a qualitative study. *Healthcare* 11(17):2424. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11172424>