

## EpiC Tajikistan: Summary of Achievements

January 2021–June 2023

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Government of Tajikistan has reported 17,786 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 125 deaths. The country has reported administering 21,833,680 vaccines as of May 24, 2023, achieving 99.1 percent coverage of the target population. The Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and led by FHI 360 has supported the Government of Tajikistan to mitigate COVID-19 transmission, morbidity, and mortality, as well as to strengthen the health care system to handle health future emergencies.

EpiC's COVID-19 activities were implemented in Tajikistan from January 2021 through June 2023. Project activities took place across the country in the Dushanbe, Districts of Republican Subordination (DRS), Khaton, Sughd, and Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous (GBAO) regions. They were led by FHI 360 in collaboration with the USAID/Tajikistan Mission; the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSPP) of the Republic of Tajikistan; the Institute of Postgraduate Education in the field of Health of the Republic of Tajikistan (IPEH); Tajik Technical University (TTU); the Development Coordination Council's (DCC) Health Platform; international partners including the World Health Organization, Chemonics International; and 107 health care facilities across the country. Over the course of 26 months, EpiC and its partners worked to improve the knowledge and practice of infection prevention and control (IPC) measures among frontline health care workers and built the capacity of the health workforce to improve clinical management of COVID-19 cases at the primary and hospital levels.

To highlight project successes and results of its COVID-19 activities, EpiC Tajikistan developed a [two-minute video](#) to raise awareness about the contributions of USAID and the EpiC project to strengthening the healthcare system.

### Key Accomplishments

- Developed seven national clinical protocols, guidelines, and training modules related to COVID-19
- Trained 274 health care workers on IPC
- Trained 274 health care workers on clinical management of COVID-19 patients
- Trained 96 health care workers on resuscitation of patients with COVID-19
- Trained 32 health care workers on pulmonology, particularly in the context of COVID-19
- Trained 35 oxygen specialists on the basics of safe use of oxygen equipment
- Trained 70 health care workers on post-COVID clinical support and rehabilitation
- Installed medical oxygen systems in three facilities
- Established resource center on safe oxygen at the Tajik Technical University
- Provided mentoring support to 278 health workers on IPC, resuscitation, and oxygen safe use
- Conducted COVID vaccine demand generation campaign

## Activities and Results

### INCREASING KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE OF COVID-19 INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL MEASURES



Health workers receive practical training on the use of personal protective equipment at Bokhtar Central City Hospital. Photo by EpiC Tajikistan

The EpiC-supported activities built upon previous technical assistance (TA) which FHI 360 had provided in Tajikistan in 2021 through USAID's Global Health Supply Chain Program-Procurement and Supply Chain Management (GHSC-PSM) project. This work had included a rapid assessment of clinical TA needs in 10 health facilities across Tajikistan to prepare for the effective use of USAID-provided oxygen resources. Based on the gaps in health worker knowledge and practice of IPC that were identified in the rapid assessment, FHI 360 developed and rolled out clinical trainings in three regions to improve

knowledge, practice, and skills of health practitioners in the early diagnosis, management, and prevention of COVID-19; clinical management of hypoxemic patients; and IPC.

Following FHI 360's work in the country through the GHSC-PSM project, EpiC collaborated with the MoHSPP to develop an IPC training curriculum. Using the curriculum, they then conducted seven cascade trainings for 274 frontline health care workers, including doctors and nurses representing 51 medical facilities and institutions across five regions in Tajikistan. The interactive trainings included group work, discussion, and brainstorming and covered risk of nosocomial infections, correct donning and doffing of personal protective equipment (PPE) (e.g., masks, respirators, gowns, gloves, shoe coverings, and eye protection), and medical waste management, among other topics. Participants received USB drives with all training materials and were awarded certificates of participation. EpiC's strong partnership with the MoHSPP, the project's productive use of the rapid assessment results in developing the IPC training curriculum, and the interactive nature of the trainings were critical factors in the success of the IPC trainings.

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*Discussion and practical sessions on how to accurately use, fit, wear, and take off the PPE showed how proper use of PPE plays a crucial role in preventing and reducing fatalities, injuries, infections, and diseases at work. Practicing putting on the PPE is much easier to remember than lectures or words, and I am certain I will not forget the correct way to take care of my health and the health of my colleagues.*

~Abdulloeva Bunafsha, nurse at Central District Hospital, Kushoniyon

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*A physician at Panjakent Central City Hospital receives practical training in the use of pulse oximeters.  
Photo by EpiC Tajikistan*

To ensure the safety of the staff and clients of the project's community-based organization (CBO) partners, EpiC also developed an IPC training module for the CBO staff. The project conducted trainings with 74 CBO staff members to familiarize them with the basics of IPC for preventing the spread of COVID-19 among staff and clients.

#### **STRENGTHENING CAPACITY TO PROVIDE CLINICAL CASE MANAGEMENT OF COVID-19**

In collaboration with the MoHSPP, EpiC established a technical working group (TWG) comprised of leading Tajikistan health experts specializing in internal medicine, pulmonology, resuscitation, infectious disease, and emergency care to update or develop protocols and guidelines for the clinical identification, management, rehabilitation, and support of COVID-19 and other hypoxic cases. One such document was the National COVID-19 clinical protocol, which was updated with EpiC support twice (in February 2022 and April 2023) and approved by the MoHSPP. The TWG also developed a clinical protocol for the management of hypoxic patients and a guideline for post-COVID-19 clinical support and rehabilitation, both of which were submitted to the MoHSPP for approval in February 2023. The protocols and guidelines will be used in hospitals and medical facilities across Tajikistan.

To strengthen and build capacity in the clinical case management of COVID-19, EpiC conducted seven additional cascade trainings with the 274 doctors and nurses who had received the IPC trainings. These trainings consisted of interactive lectures, brainstorming, group work, case studies, and question-and-answer sessions covering diagnostic approaches and respiratory support for patients with COVID-19 or other health conditions; the importance of measuring blood oxygen; pharmacotherapy for COVID-19; differential diagnosis of COVID-19 pneumonia vs. bacterial pneumonia; and treatment of COVID-19 at home. Participants received pulse oximeters and feedback on their performance.

To improve the management of COVID-19 cases, EpiC also conducted trainings on patient resuscitation for more than 96 anesthesiologists and resuscitators from 39 health care facilities across the Dushanbe, DRS, Sughd, Khatlon, and GBAO regions. The interactive trainings covered the treatment of hypoxemia, respiratory therapy for COVID-19 patients, ventilation systems, and the safe use of artificial ventilation (AVL), as well as included practical sessions on the correct use of AVL. EpiC's hands-on, interactive approach to capacity building equipped frontline health workers with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to care for COVID-19 patients in need of respiratory support.

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*Being a resuscitator in the district, I found it very useful to refresh my knowledge and obtain new, easy-to-apply information about artificial lung ventilation for patients with COVID-19, since it is very relevant for my patients with hypoxia. The most useful part of the training for me was the opportunity to ask questions about real cases from my practical work in the district and then receive qualified responses. Case review is always exciting and helps us learn from mistakes.*

*—Katakhujjev Sharif, resuscitator at Vahdat Central Town Hospital*

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In collaboration with IPEH, EpiC developed and delivered a one-month professional development program focusing on pulmonology and COVID-19 for 32 general practitioners and family doctors from 32 medical facilities across the country. Participants had access to the State Medical Center and Hospital "Istiqlol," which allowed them to apply gained knowledge during treatment of patients experiencing various pulmonary diseases.

In light of increasing numbers of patients with post-COVID-19 syndrome and the success of collaborating with IPEH, EpiC conducted three two-day trainings on post-COVID-19 clinical support and rehabilitation for 70 health care workers from 39 medical facilities in the Dushanbe, DRS, Khatlon, and Sughd regions. As a result, these 70 infectious disease specialists, family doctors, and general practitioners can now support patients from their districts to recover from the wide range of physical and mental health consequences they are experiencing due to "long COVID."

### **IMPROVING THE MEDICAL OXYGEN ECOSYSTEM**

Medical oxygen is a life-saving therapy for severe cases of COVID-19. The dramatic increase in the number of patients suffering from hypoxia at the beginning of the pandemic highlighted an urgent need for increased production and supply of medical oxygen in Tajikistan. In response, EpiC worked with the MoHSPP to improve access to medical oxygen at selected hospitals.

EpiC coordinated with the MoHSPP to improve the physical infrastructure at Bokhtar, Panjakent, and Konibodom hospitals to connect their oxygen stations to their respective oxygen supply

systems via new medical oxygen piping. This included the installation of 47 oxygen supply points across all three hospitals, capable of providing oxygen simultaneously for a total of 94 patients in intensive care, surgery, endocrinology, therapy, gastroenterology, and infectious disease units. These improvements made it possible for the three hospitals to guarantee oxygen supply in their own wards as well as supply other nearby health facilities by refilling their oxygen cylinders.

In October 2022, as part of EpiC’s sustainability strategy, EpiC established the Resource Center for Safe Oxygen Use at Tajik Technical University in Dushanbe with the goal of training the specialists and strengthening the capacity of medical facilities on the safe use of oxygen equipment. In addition to training university students and technical specialists from medical institutions, the center helps to address the country’s growing need for qualified personnel to ensure the safe operation of oxygen equipment.

In December 2022 and January 2023, EpiC conducted two trainings at the center on the basics of safe production and use of oxygen to 35 technical (i.e., nonclinical) staff from 28 selected medical facilities across Tajikistan.

### REACHING PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV WITH COVID-19 VACCINATION

EpiC implemented several activities to increase demand for vaccination among people living with HIV (PLHIV) and key populations (KPs). The project designed a vaccination demand-generation campaign that addressed the most frequently mentioned barriers to vaccination among these groups, including possible side effects and concerns about the effectiveness of the vaccine. As part of these activities, EpiC designed, printed, and disseminated posters promoting COVID-19 vaccination through targeted messages for PLHIV and KPs, as well as messages intended for the general population.

Posters were designed to raise awareness, increase demand, and dispel myths about vaccination that prevented people from getting vaccinated. EpiC developed slogans calling on the population(s) to be vaccinated which were used during vaccine demand-generation campaigns. The slogans also appeared for 30 days on e-banners in the center of Dushanbe City, reaching more than 5,000 people per day, and were promoted through social media. In addition, EpiC launched a demand-generation campaign on Facebook that included a video and photos and reached almost 400,000 Facebook users.



EpiC developed posters to increase demand for COVID-19 vaccination.

EpiC also built the capacity of the project's CBO partners on how to protect themselves from COVID-19 infection through vaccination while continuing to provide essential HIV services. To generate vaccine demand among the CBO staff, the project designed and conducted a training on vaccination for 76 staff of four CBOs. In turn, the intention was for these staff to further disseminate information among their clients and among KPs.

Also, to ensure timely detection of COVID-19 and prevent its further spread, 750 SARS-COV-2 antigen tests were purchased and distributed to project staff, including staff of CBOs and their family members.

### Ensuring sustainability of project activities

Between December 2022 and March 2023, the project built on previously conducted training sessions to provide mentorship support to 278 health care workers and oxygen specialists at health facilities across the country.

Such mentorship promotes sustainability of capacity building activities, as it provides learning and growth opportunities for healthcare workers and oxygen specialists through on-the-job support and feedback, as well as knowledge and skills refreshers.

### Next steps

During a national COVID-19 closeout meeting in Tajikistan in April 2023, a new USAID initiative on global health security was introduced. EpiC looks forward to continuing to leverage investments by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Research (PEPFAR) to strengthen health systems, build resiliency, and prepare for future emerging infectious disease threats.

Potential high-impact areas to consider for support include (1) strengthening the capacity of the national emergency center at the national and subnational levels; (2) expanding TA in IPC; (3) strengthening diagnostic capacity that will lead to early detection of emerging diseases; and (4) increasing partnerships with regional and international entities working in the areas of pandemic preparedness and response.

### Advancing Global Health Security Priorities

EpiC contributed to the global health security agenda through emphasis on and extensive training in IPC in among frontline health workers in Tajikistan. FHI 360's initial rapid assessment of clinical TA needs for the effective use of oxygen resources through USAID's GHSC-PHM project revealed gaps in IPC knowledge and practice, which had proven detrimental during the first year of the pandemic. Through the development of robust and interactive trainings, EpiC, in collaboration with the MoHSPP, facilitated the development of essential IPC skills among the health workforce that will not only prove relevant in the context of COVID-19, but also during future global health emergencies. Such skills-based training will improve the safety of frontline workers and reduce the risk of occupational and hospital-acquired infections.

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