

MTN IN THE RESPONSE TO HIV AND AIDS

BY TIMES REPORTER

MBABANE – Swazi MTN's involvement in the national response to HIV and AIDS is barely spoken about. Yet the company is supporting active participation in reducing new HIV infections through voluntary testing and counselling, as the starting point in the continuum of care, among its staff members.

For a couple of years running now, Swazi MTN has availed voluntary testing and counselling of HIV within the company premises to all staff on World AIDS Day commemoration, which happens globally on December 1.

This commemoration does more than remind organisations to raise awareness on the devastating challenges of HIV and AIDS. It is also an opportunity to motivate action to stop new HIV infections, and step up support for those living with HIV.

According to Swazi MTN Head of Human Resources, Mncenzi Ngomane, an average of 13.6 per cent of staff members voluntarily test for HIV during World AIDS Day commemoration. This initiative is implemented with support from SWABCHA, a leading coordinator in HIV and health interventions within the business community.

During MTN's World AIDS Day commemoration, voluntary testing and counselling is not just a service limited to HIV. There are other critical tests which work well as pointers to good health like cholesterol, body mass index test to mention but a few.

Additional to internal interventions in HIV and AIDS, Swazi MTN has started formalising engagement with National Response Council on HIV and AIDS (NERCHA), a body re-



Swazi MTN Headquarters in Ezulwini.

sponsible for coordinating strategy formulation, monitoring and evaluation, as well as coordination of the multisectoral response to HIV. One of these engagements has seen Swazi MTN support the recent World AIDS Campaign to the value of more than E50 000 through a gig rig fully accessorised with a stage, sound system and other accessories.

Speaking of this partnership, MTN Chief Executive Officer Ambrose Dlamini, said private public partnerships were the way to go particularly because Swazi MTN was committed to supporting His Majesty's Vision for an AIDS-free Swaziland by 2022.

"Swazi MTN realises that private public partnerships are a popular and powerful approach to mobilise resources for HIV and AIDS. As a leading telecommunications company in Swaziland, we are in a good place to facilitate access to information through wide-reaching platforms which can be creatively used to provide functional information on how to prevent new HIV infections, and extend support to those courageously living with HIV," said Dlamini.

Additional to these interventions within the company, MTN has invested towards education of vulnerable children in the Shiselweni Region

through Shiselweni Home-Based Care, a not-for-profit organisation that operates from Dwaleni, and continues to support care givers from over 45 communities within the region. This year, Shiselweni Home-Based Care has received E250 000 from MTN Foundation, the corporate social responsibility wing of MTN.

The preschool project, supported by MTN Foundation since 2011, has significantly improved literacy where reading and writing among young people would have been intuitively low. Further, the preschool does more than prepare children for school. It places them in a context where their social skills can be nurtured as they interact with other children, a luxury they would not enjoy in child-headed households.

Shiselweni Home-Based Care Director, Dr. Arnau van Wyngaard, said through MTN Foundation, they had done more than building a preschool. They had hired, trained teachers, and home-based caregivers who were graciously spread across the region to serve.

"Since home-based care givers have been trained to deliver exceptionally well on their mandate, on a daily basis, they take care of people, many of whom are living in unimaginable circumstances," noted Dr. Arnau van Wyngaard.

The training, and deployment of

home-based care givers complements Governments' Rural Health Motivation (RHM) programme. Home-based care givers are critical in providing psycho-social support to those battling with chronic challenges, including AIDS.

"As a result of this programme, we have seen in the past years, a pronounced improvement in antiretroviral compliance, and a reduction in AIDS-related deaths in the region," says Dr. Wyngaard.

While some are of the view that with the introduction of antiretroviral treatment, home-based care has lost its channel, NERCHA's Acting Response Leadership Director Nokwazi Mathabela said it still had a special place.

"In the era of antiretroviral treatment home-based care is still critical. The only major difference is that it is now administered in an integrated format and provides a different set of deliverables. This time around, caregivers are not just delivering soap and adult nappies anymore, something that was common in the early stages of the national response of HIV. Significantly, they now drive compliance to antiretroviral treatment, and related services which helps improve the quality of life for those living with HIV," she explained.