

EVENT NOTE

Tamilnadu's first TB survivor-led network launched

March 26, Chennai: Over one hundred Tuberculosis (TB) survivors from Tamilnadu have come together to form a TB survivor-led network, a first of its kind in the state. The network was launched here in the presence of Dr Asha Frederick, State TB Officer, National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP), Tamilnadu, Dr Suma S, WHO Consultant to NTEP, Tamilnadu and Dr Lakshmi Murali, District TB Officer, Thiruvallur and TB survivor-turned-Champions. The announcement comes days after World TB Day was observed in New Delhi on March 24, where a TB Champion from Tamilnadu was felicitated. The formation of the network was facilitated by REACH, a Chennai-based non-profit organisation working on TB for over two decades.

Valarmathi, a TB survivor-turned-Champion from Vellore, had TB in 2018. She got very little support from her family when her husband was affected by MDR-TB, and her son by TB. She said, "I am confident that this network will benefit people affected by TB. I firmly believe in the power of community. One tree doesn't make a forest. I call upon other TB survivors to join us and stand united to end TB and stigma surrounding TB from Tamilnadu and India and eventually the world."

Speaking at the launch, Dr Asha Frederick said, "We look forward to TB Champions to come to the programme with the demands, needs and difficulties of TB-affected communities. With TB Champions in every district of the state, we hope the NTEP's TB elimination efforts will be further amplified."

"Community engagement has been a priority for REACH since our inception over two decades ago. Through our various projects, we work to build the capacity of communities, including those most affected by TB and support them to become active Champions in the community. The formation of the survivor-led network is an important step towards strengthening community-led responses to TB in Tamilnadu", said Dr Ramya Ananthakrishnan, Director, REACH.

The formation of the network comes after over 120 TB survivors attended capacity building workshops last year. Following this, several TB Champions began working in the community in September 2020. Every district of Tamilnadu has at least two TB Champions.

"Since then, the TB Champions have been providing support to people with TB in their communities, giving them and their families psychosocial support and addressing widespread stigma in the community by raising awareness on TB. They have also been working to identify people with symptoms and linking them to free TB care diagnosis. Over the last six months, they have supported over 1200 people with TB. They are also working with the communities and the programme to improve the quality of TB care and services," said Dr Sripriya Pandurangan, Deputy Project Director, ALLIES Project, REACH.

The formation of the network is in alignment with India's National Strategic Plan (NSP) for TB for 2017-25. The NSP calls for affected communities to no longer be passive recipients of care but become active and motivated stakeholders in the nation's response to TB.

About REACH

An acronym for Resource Group for Education and Advocacy for Community Health, REACH was established in 1999 in response to the rolling out of the Revised National TB Control Program (RNTCP) in Tamil Nadu. This event was organised in keeping with REACH's mandate under the ALLIES (Accountability Leadership by Local Communities for Inclusive, Enabling Services) Project supported by USAID. The ALLIES project seeks to improve the environment for TB elimination by promoting community action for accountability. The project positions the community as ALLIES to the program and adopts an approach based on recognition of both rights and responsibilities.

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