

# Mobile HIV testing in KZN

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The Mpilonhle mobile unit visits schools  
in rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal.

(Image: [Mpilonhle](#))





South African actress Charlize Theron is working with Mpilonhle to educate schoolchildren. (Image: [Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project](#))





The Mpilonhle project gives teenagers a chance to succeed in life by educating them in HIV prevention, and helping them improve their computer skills.

(Image: [Mpilonhle](#))

*Janine Erasmus*

Now in its second year, the Mpilonhle project uses innovative mobile health and education units in rural schools and communities in KwaZulu-Natal to provide medical and social services, give HIV counselling and education, and assist people to improve their computer skills.

The main aim of Mpilonhle (isiZulu, meaning “good life”) is to improve the health and enhance social development of people, especially the youth, in KwaZulu-Natal. According to the project’s founders, which include healthcare expert Nompumelelo Zwane, there is increasing assistance for those already infected with HIV but less progress has been made in actual prevention of the disease.

The most vulnerable group for new HIV infections are adolescents, who are in desperate need of more tools to help them maintain good health and give them a greater chance of success in South Africa. In fact, says project partner Inveneo, youngsters in Umkhanyakude District, the northernmost of the province’s 11 districts where Mpilonhle does most of its work, have an almost 50% chance of becoming infected with HIV during their lifetime.

## Taking services to the people

Mpilonhle reaches these youngsters by taking its eye-catching mobile units directly to their schools. These base camps provide essential life-saving services, not only to pupils, but to all members of the community. The project currently reaches over 8 000 pupils as well as their families.

Each Mpilonhle mobile health unit consists of a pair of identical trailers with an awning stretched between them to provide useful teaching space. Inside, there are two counselling rooms, space for equipment storage, and a bank of low power-consuming computers.

Interactive group sessions are held in communities on a regular basis under the guidance of a professional health educator, and are adapted to the age of the students. Topics include the importance of being faithful to a single partner, practicing safe sex, being tested for HIV, the risks associated with substance abuse, and healthy eating. For those already infected, discussion sessions also provide guidance for dealing with the stigma of HIV, and advice on living with the disease.

With regard to computer literacy, the organisation holds classes in its mobile units, each of which is fitted with 24 computers that are freely available to students for as long as the units remain in the community. Students are trained in computer basics and then move on to word processing, databases, presentations and spreadsheets before progressing to the use of email and the internet.

The computer laboratory runs off generators in the mobile units without any risk of draining the existing power supply. Mpilonhle uses NGO Inveneo's ultra-low power computer workstations because they require significantly less power than a traditional desktop or laptop computer.

Health screening services are provided to communities and cover voluntary HIV testing, screening and care for other sexually transmitted infections as well as diseases such as tuberculosis, and general health care for pregnancy, hypertension, asthma, substance abuse and social, emotional and psychological problems, among others.

Should any related problems be discovered during screening, the Mpilonhle nurse in charge of the unit will further evaluate the patient's condition and provide appropriate treatment and counselling – but will refer patients to hospitals or clinics for treatment of more complex issues.

Mpilonhle also feeds 40 orphan-headed households, supplying packages that are sufficient for seven people. These households do not qualify for government assistance because the orphan, though still at school, is older than 18.

## A network of international partners

The Mpilonhle project has received support from the Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project, the Oprah Winfrey Angels Network, the Entertainment Industry Foundation, the United States President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief, and computer processor developer AMD under its 50x15 initiative, which aims to help provide affordable Internet access and computing capabilities for 50% of the world's population by 2015.

The project is the first for Oscar-winning South African actress Theron's foundation. "The mobile clinic has been very well received by the people it serves," she said, "and is already providing young South Africans with the health education, treatments and computer training needed to help overcome the challenges they face. During a recent visit, I had the privilege of

spending time with students as they shared their hopes and dreams for a better, healthier life. As a native South African, I am totally committed to helping them achieve those dreams.”

Mpilonhle also received assistance from Inveneo, which specialises in providing low-cost ICT solutions to those in remote and rural communities in the developing world. The organisation’s solutions are specifically designed to overcome the main challenges in these far-flung areas, such as erratic or non-existent power supply, lack of affordable access to the internet, and unforgiving climate conditions.

Inveneo provides both hardware and software in the form of computers and servers that can run off a battery or renewable energy system, wireless equipment, and free or open source operating systems. The organisation also provides installation and support by recruiting and training suitable people from the local community.

- Do you have queries or comments about this article? Email Janine Erasmus at [janinee@medioclubsouthafrica.com](mailto:janinee@medioclubsouthafrica.com).

## Useful links

- [Mpilonhle](#)
- [Mpilonhle blog](#)
- [Inveneo](#)
- [Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project](#)
- [Oprah’s Angel Network](#)
- [United States President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief](#)
- [AMD 50x15 Initiative](#)

