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VillageReach nonprofit rolls out supply-chain management system

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - by [Clay Holtzman](#) Staff Writer

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Despite recent gains in global health research and development, a local nonprofit says health care systems still face a significant bottleneck in how they deliver services and commodities to the world's poor.

Later this month, Seattle-based [w VillageReach](#) will release a health management information system called vrMIS that it says will better record health data and improve the management of supply chains that service remote clinics where people sometimes travel for days to reach the nearest health clinic.

“The lack of good information systems is a real problem for the ability to build efficient distribution systems,” said James Dailey, chief technology officer at VillageReach. “We are trying to shove hundreds of millions, even billions of dollars worth of new drugs through inadequate pipes.”

VillageReach’s new logistics and information management system could improve the delivery of health services as well as the efficiency of the systems that provide them, much in the way that IT systems have improved business processes in industrialized nations. But because it also records treatments and reports them at the population level, it could also become a critical source of health data, which is increasingly important for policy makers, health ministries and commercial and philanthropic funding sources including the [w Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#).

With improved supply chain management, health systems in the developing world can reach more people, waste fewer supplies and lower health care costs. Improved data collection could also better identify health needs in geographic areas and give funders a clearer picture of what they are supporting. And because Village-Reach plans to sell consulting services to those who will use its new information system, it could increase its annual revenue, which has historically come from donors and foundations.

Already VillageReach is using its vrMIS system to expand a project in Mozambique that it says has seen the benefit of improved supply chain management. Between 2001 and 2008, VillageReach used an earlier, non-web based version of the software to increase

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child immunization rates from below 68 percent in 2003 to 95 percent in 2008. The program also reduced the percentage of clinics reporting a supply shortage from 80 percent to 1 percent during the same time period.

“There is a very weak link in that whole distribution model, specifically in the last mile (of delivery),” said John Beale, director of strategic development at VillageReach.

Improved efficiency also could reduce costs. In Mozambique, the cost of vaccinating each child decreased from \$6.07 per dose to \$5.03 per dose, according to a review of VillageReach’s program.

VillageReach, which says it plans to deploy its new system in India and Senegal this year, says it created the vrMIS with input from public health workers and it is designed for use in rural areas. For example, remote health workers can upload information via text messages.

Dailey, the nonprofit’s chief technologist, helped create a similar open-source system for microfinance institutions while working at the [Grameen Technology Center](#) in Seattle.

Systems experts say many developing nations must improve their supply chains to better serve patients, and that information technology is an obvious option.

“It is clear there’s a critical lack of information at many levels within the systems we look at,” said Anjali Sastry, a senior lecturer at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “Someone who is running a clinic or hospital or supply room isn’t always exchanging information with people at the district level who are figuring out what to ship out from the district stores.”

VillageReach said its software is meant to solve those problems, but also to track the delivery of health products, which can then be reported to a central authority — such as a health ministry — to show just how the health system is performing.

Traditionally, health data is recorded on paper at individual clinics, which is then aggregated many times over to provide a broad picture of what conditions are like on the ground. But each step of that process data can be recorded wrong, or the entire process can take months to complete.

Improving information technology systems is the critical link to improving global health care, said David Lubinski, program adviser for health management information systems at Seattle-based PATH, which has worked with VillageReach.

“The role of information systems in the developing world is only increasing,” Lubinski said. “The very things that we take for granted have allowed us to use and exploit information in a variety of ways. That is exactly the same dynamic that we think is going to strengthen health systems in the developing world.”

Lubinski, who previously worked at [Microsoft Corp.](#), said how much global health groups and agencies embrace VillageReach’s new product depends in part on how many are drawn to its open-source platform. Open source products typically rely heavily on user input to increase their popularity.

After working for a decade on improving the delivery of health services into rural areas, VillageReach’s leaders say the vrMIS system could generate more support for its logistics-oriented approach.

“We believe that the trend is heading our way, toward the last mile. That’s the weak link,” said Allen Wilcox, president of VillageReach.

choltzman@bizjournals.com | 206.876.5439

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