Knowing when and where to seek quality health care is essential to improving health outcomes. In remote and rural communities, distance often prevents people from accessing the health information they need. Even if patients reach a health facility, overburdened staff could mean they get as little as a single minute with a health provider.

Health Center by Phone extends the reach of the health care system to every community by providing access to certified health and nutrition information and services via a toll-free number. In addition, Health Center by Phone gives people the power to make informed decisions about when to seek further care at a health center. Multilingual and voice messaging options ensure that language and literacy are not a barrier to access.

Addressing the Health Information Gap in Malawi

The Malawi Ministry of Health and Population and VillageReach developed Health Center by Phone as a community-based hotline in the Balaka district of Malawi. Called Chipatala cha pa Foni (CCPF) in Chichewa, the hotline initially focused on maternal and child health needs. CCPF has since expanded to include all standard health topics—including water, sanitation, and hygiene; infectious diseases; and nutrition—in accordance with Malawi’s Ministry of Health guidelines. Youth services were introduced in 2017, increasing access to sexual and reproductive health information for young people. CCPF also can address emergent health issues, such as cholera outbreaks.

CCPF Expansion: from Pilot to National Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Health Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Balaka District</td>
<td>MNCH, Nutritional Support, General Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>5 Districts</td>
<td>MNCH, Nutritional Support, General Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>8 Districts</td>
<td>MNCH, Nutritional Support, General Health, Adolescent SRH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>9 Districts</td>
<td>MNCH, Nutritional Support, General Health, Adolescent SRH, All Health Topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Nationwide</td>
<td>MNCH, Nutritional Support, General Health, Adolescent SRH, All Health Topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How it Works

TOLL-FREE HOTLINE
- Professionally-staffed hotline providing information on health and nutrition
- 24 hours / 7 days a week
- Calls free on an Airtel phone
- Hotline workers triage calls to doctors and refer callers for further care at a health center when needed

TIPS AND REMINDERS
- Personalized SMS or voice messages on a weekly basis for those with personal phones
- Dial-in to retrieve messages from any Airtel phone for those without personal phones
- Content specific to women of reproductive age, pregnant women, caregivers of children under one, or adolescent sexual and reproductive health
Sustaining CCPF in Malawi

CCPF expanded through a multisectoral partnership comprising government, community, donor, private sector and non-governmental stakeholders. Mobile carrier Airtel helped increase the reach of the service through promoting it and by zero-rating all calls to the hotline. This partnership, along with the government’s commitment and support, has been essential to national scale-up and sustainability. CCPF is now available nationwide and is in the process of being integrated into and operated by the Ministry of Health and Population.

“CCPF is an important part of achieving universal health coverage in Malawi and reaching rural communities who make up almost 74% of the population.”
–Atupele Muluzi, Minister of Health and Population, Malawi

Improving Health Knowledge and Health-Seeking Behavior

A 2018 external evaluation of CCPF demonstrated improved knowledge and behavior change in a wide range of health indicators, including improvements in:

- Antenatal care in the first trimester
- Rates of testing for HIV
- Immunization rates
- Use of modern contraceptives
- Knowledge and consumption of six food groups.

A Lifeline for Families

Mercy delivered her baby on the way to the health center. Distraught, Mercy called CCPF and spoke to Rose, a CCPF hotline worker who helped coordinate emergency transport while encouraging Mercy to go to the health center. Had it not been for CCPF and the transport officer, Mercy may have suffered severe bleeding and infection. Fortunately, she and her baby both received timely and appropriate care.

Patuma’s five-year-old daughter had frequent nose bleeds made worse by hot weather and malnutrition. When she returned from a long trip to the health center, her daughter’s condition persisted. A CCPF health worker provided her with additional information and explained the root cause of the condition. Patuma was relieved to see her daughter’s condition greatly improve. She and her family now use CCPF regularly to get timely answers to routine health questions.

Replicating Success in Other Countries

Discussions are underway to explore how the Health Center by Phone solution and experience can expand the reach of the health system in other countries. For more information, please email info@villagereach.org.