Strengthening Health Systems through COVID & Beyond

Photo Credit: Homeline Media
In 2021, I felt like I was on a roller coaster. The excitement we collectively felt in January with the introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine plummeted as we saw vast global inequities to vaccine access. Our relief from declines in COVID-19 cases and deaths in one part of the world turned quickly to despair as new variants were identified in another part of the world. None of our staff were untouched by this pandemic.

It is hard to be forward thinking on a roller coaster, but at VillageReach, that is exactly what we set out to do early in the pandemic. While our COVID-19 response efforts required us to adapt and pivot some of our work, our big picture remained the same. Our goal is to accelerate the development of people-centered health systems and to be a global leader in radical collaboration to scale and sustain impact.

While keeping this mindset and acting quickly, we helped improve access to quality health care for 58 million people in sub-Saharan Africa — surpassing our target of reaching 50 million people by 2023.

We achieved this through using impactful solutions and strong partnerships to strengthen health systems through COVID-19 and beyond.

In Malawi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) we used drones to deliver essential medicines and supplies to remote communities, returning lab tests and medical reports to provincial health facilities. With this infrastructure in place, we later delivered COVID-19 vaccines and supplies building community trust and government commitment. We also collected important evidence on how and when to use drones in a resilient, responsive supply chain.

We helped governments share accurate COVID-19 information. In Malawi and Mozambique, we expanded government health hotlines to become a primary source for COVID-19 information and introduced a new AI chatbot. Extending the health system into every home during a pandemic is vital, and these digital solutions also create opportunities for long-term access to accurate health information and quality health services.

Across 18 countries we helped coordinate the COVID-19 Action Fund for Africa with over 30 partners and Ministries of Health to get personal protective equipment (PPE) to community health workers (CHWs). This initiative is part of our larger efforts to protect, support and supply CHWs by raising awareness of their critical role in strengthening health systems.

In Malawi, DRC, Mozambique, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire and Washington State we used our 20 years of vaccine delivery experience to work with governments to prepare for, distribute and administer COVID-19 vaccines. The unique opportunity to work with local health jurisdictions in Washington State allowed us to bring African expertise to the US context and engage in bi-directional learning to help national and local governments manage the stages of their COVID vaccination campaigns.

In Mozambique, through community-led, participatory research, we are also learning about vaccine hesitancy among caregivers, and in 2022 are extending this work to Malawi. Understanding community demand for vaccines is critical for vaccine delivery, both now and in the future.

While our COVID response work continues in 2022, we know the ups and downs of this pandemic roller coaster will impact health systems for many years to come. Therefore, VillageReach is more determined than ever to move forward and focus on what we know works: investing in engaged and supported health workers, empowered communities, and people-centered solutions.

This is how we will get products to people and build stronger primary health care systems to reach everyone.

All the best,

Emily Bancroft
President, VillageReach
Our COVID-19 Response in FY2021

Health Center by Phone

We expanded health hotlines in Malawi and Mozambique to hire more hotline workers, extend hours of operation and create interactive voice messages with COVID specific content. Using this digital solution, communities had increased access to accurate and timely COVID information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of COVID-related hotline calls</th>
<th>Malawi: Chipatala cha pa Foni (CCPF)</th>
<th>Mozambique: AloVida</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>79,555</td>
<td>46,429</td>
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| # of COVID-related Interactive Voice Recording IVR messages | 292,600 | 80,000 |

CAF-Africa

We were a core collaborator in the COVID-19 Action Fund for Africa, an emergency initiative designed to get PPE to CHWs in Africa. Working with 30 organizations and Ministries of Health, we supported the bulk of last mile deliveries in FY2021.

- 18 Countries
- 479,508 CHWs reached
- 121.3 Million units of PPE delivered

COVID-19 Vaccine Delivery

We are supporting COVID-19 vaccine delivery in 5 African countries and Washington State, providing tailored assistance throughout the delivery lifecycle. This work not only supports COVID-19 vaccine delivery but also strengthens the overall supply chain in each country.

Vaccine Planning and System Readiness

Data for Decision Making

Storage

Distribution/Delivery

Demand Generation

Vaccine Administration

Snapshot of Vaccine Delivery

- **Washington State, USA**: 120,000 people vaccinated in King County in six months in partnership with King County Public Health
- **Liberia**: 2,400 community health workers vaccinated in partnership with the Liberian Government and Last Mile Health
- **Côte d’Ivoire**
- **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**
- **Mozambique**
- **Malawi**: 37% of calls to CCPF related to the COVID-19 vaccine addressed vaccine misinformation
Partnering with the DRC MoH and Australian drone-powered logistics company Swoop Aero, VillageReach began routine medical deliveries using drones in Équateur concentrating on remote and hard-to-reach health facilities. By the end of September 2021, a total of 31 of these health facilities received vaccines and supplies monthly and carried back patient samples to be tested for a variety of viruses, such as HIV and Ebola, on return flights.

Making a dream a reality

Those first successful flights felt like a “dream come true” according to Dr. Archimede and proved to government officials that this type of delivery was possible. By the end of September 2021, drone flights made 652 deliveries that included 90,110 vaccine doses and equipment for vaccine administration, as well as medicines and other health products. These deliveries supported the routine immunization of 24,652 children under the age of 1 and of 9,515 pregnant women against tetanus-diphtheria infections.

Drones typically fly at speeds of 100 km per hour, significantly reducing the time it takes to reach remote areas. In just under 700 flight hours, nearly 70,000 km were flown by drones in the province.

Dr. Archimede said that drones were able to strengthen the country’s pandemic response and help maintain routine health service with this infrastructure in place. Drones also reduce health worker travel and opportunities for exposure during outbreaks such as Ebola or COVID-19.

“Every person who was in touch with us was very happy to hear that we could fly from one location to another, bringing vaccine doses without putting a health worker at risk,” said Dr. Archimede.

A people-centered approach

In addition to getting government buy-in to use drones in Équateur, Dr. Archimede also had to build community trust. Many people living in rural areas were less familiar with drones he said, and many expressed skepticism about drones flying over homes thinking drones would be used as surveillance.

But those fears subsided after the first successful deliveries, and Dr. Archimede has even observed that people living in these remote areas began to prefer the vaccines transported by drones as they knew they were receiving high-quality products that had not spent several days in transit.

To him, that community enthusiasm shows that there is room for expansion to other provinces in DRC as the government and VillageReach work to grow the drones program. “Our midterm evaluation in June 2021 showed greatly improved availability of vaccines in the hard-to-reach health facilities served by drones, and almost no stockouts,” Dr. Archimede said. “As we make products consistently available in remote facilities, we also see more community members coming to health center to be vaccinated or to vaccinate their babies.”

Collaborating with the Malawi Ministry of Health and District Health Offices, VillageReach and Swoop Aero made 584 product deliveries traveling 35,000 km between May and September 2021. The drones delivered 8,743 doses of routine vaccines and 6,009 COVID-19 vaccine doses to 27 health facilities in the Chikwawa and Nsanje districts of southern Malawi and sent back 1,431 HIV and TB samples on return flights.

Malawi Drone Program

Dr. Archimede Makaya is passionate about finding sustainable solutions to improve access to quality health care in rural communities.

Before coming to VillageReach, Dr. Archimede worked tirelessly in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as a physician treating patients and spent over a decade at the DRC Ministry of Health (MoH) working to strengthen health systems.

Seeing firsthand what limited access to lifesaving medicines and vaccines can do to communities, Dr. Archimede was excited to join VillageReach in 2017 and use drone technology to get health products to people.

The path less traveled

But when tasked with introducing drones into the health system in Équateur, a province where transportation relies heavily on the Congo River, he wasn’t expecting to be met with disbelief.

“When we started to talk to health officials about using drones, every person saw it as a joke,” Dr. Archimede said. “The thing that helped to convince them was to have worked in other countries, as our team shared experiences of successfully using drones in other countries.”
Revenue & Expenses

2021 Revenue

Grants and Contracts $25,125,552
Individual Donations $290,838
Interest and Dividends $812
Other Income $742,163
Total $26,159,382

2020 Expenses

Program $19,196,048
Management and General $3,357,970
Fundraising $194,068
Total $22,748,086

Net Operating: $3,411,296

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