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VillageReach Commences Program to Strengthen Epidemic Preparedness and Response Across Africa

Nairobi, Kenya (February 1, 2025) – VillageReach announces the launch of a program funded by Takeda Pharmaceutical Company Limited to enhance laboratory sample referral and transportation systems for epidemic-prone infectious diseases across Africa. This initiative, which commenced in January 2025, will strengthen health systems in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guinea, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda.

The program addresses critical barriers to diagnosing infectious diseases such as polio, measles, yellow fever, Ebola, mpox and cholera by improving sample transport systems, ensuring faster diagnoses, timely responses and saving lives in hard-to-reach communities.

Emily Bancroft, CEO and President of VillageReach, highlighted the significance of this work: "As we begin this critical work, we are reminded of the urgent need for robust primary health care systems that can respond swiftly to outbreaks. This program with Takeda enables us to work alongside governments to build infrastructure that not only saves lives but also enhances epidemic preparedness across the region."

The program, known as *Integrated Laboratory Transport Systems to Stop Outbreaks*, focuses on strengthening epidemic preparedness and response. It aims to enhance the efficiency and integration of laboratory sample transport systems for epidemic-prone diseases while ensuring the quality and integrity of samples during transit, enabling accurate and timely diagnoses.

The program addresses surges in laboratory sample transportation demand, facilitates community engagement and provides targeted training for health workers and transporters to further bolster outbreak responses. These measures will help contain outbreaks swiftly and reliably, reducing their impact on vulnerable populations.

The goal of the program is for all participating countries to digitize and integrate electronic reporting systems, improving data availability on sample movements and laboratory results. Additionally, the initiative will strengthen notification systems and establish patient feedback mechanisms, fostering more responsive and resilient health care systems.

Project Activities Across the Five Countries

- In the DRC, VillageReach will improve transport networks and routes to national and regional laboratories for patient samples originating in 11 provinces, train 3,500 community leaders on crisis communication during outbreaks, and train health workers and local private transporters in biosafety and biosecurity, sample collection, packaging, transport and reporting.
- In Malawi**,** VillageReach will expand on-demand transportation beyond polio and measles samples to other outbreak-prone diseases in all 800+ health facilities and train 400 community health workers to enhance outbreak detection and response.
- In Guinea, our in-country implementing partner, FHI 360 will work with the Ministry of Health to manage sample transport for all infectious diseases through a countrywide network of private local transporters using motorcycles, boats, minibuses and flights; the sample movements are captured in a web and app-based data management system, which was locally developed.
- In Tanzania, health care workers and local governments in regions affected by recurring outbreaks of cholera and measles will receive targeted training alongside efforts to engage traditional healers, influential people and local leaders to promote awareness and enhance the transportation of samples during disease outbreaks. This work will be done in collaboration with our partner organization CIHEB-Tanzania. Additionally, VillageReach will help train hotline workers at the national health call center to provide advice to the population on outbreak-prone diseases.
- In Uganda, VillageReach will partner with the Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI). The initiative aims to increase the frequency of infectious disease sample pickups as part of the integrated National Lab Sample Transport System and train community health teams in 45 outbreak-prone districts in biosafety and early outbreak detection.

Four countries will also be using real-time GPS and remote temperature monitoring (RTM) trackers during the transport of samples, to ensure the quality and integrity of samples and their timely arrival at the labs.

This program builds upon VillageReach's Polio Lab Sample Transport Program in 15 African countries, which has been ongoing since 2022 in collaboration with the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. It is part of Takeda's Global CSR Program, which committed approximately $8 million over four years to these five countries. VillageReach's work is expected to impact 116,000 people directly and millions indirectly through better disease detection and surveillance systems.

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About VillageReach

VillageReach transforms health care delivery to reach everyone. We are driven by a vision of a world where each person has the health care needed to thrive. We work with governments, the private sector, partners and communities to build responsive primary health care systems that deliver health products, information and services to the most under-reached.

About Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI)

The UVRI engages in health research pertaining to human infections and disease processes associated with or linked to viral aetiology and provides expert advice, enables partnerships and communication and serves as a center for training and education.

About FHI 360

FHI 360 is a global organization that mobilizes research, resources and relationships so people everywhere have access to the opportunities they need to lead full and healthy lives. With collaborations in over 60 countries, we work directly with local leaders to advance social and economic equity, improve health and well-being, respond to humanitarian crises and strengthen community resilience. We share data-driven insights and scalable tools that expand access and equity so communities can effectively address complex challenges, respond to shocks and achieve thriving futures. To learn more, visit fhi360.org

About CIHEB Tanzania

Ciheb Tanzania is a local-registered and led not-for-profit organization formed out of the University of Maryland Baltimore's (UMB) Tanzania programs.

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