

Fighting COVID-19 in Uganda

Vaccinating the elderly and underserved communities



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Nakitende Mary, 86, received her vaccination in Bukungu, Buyende district, Uganda. / @USAID RHITES-EC

Gladys Kahalwa, 79, and her husband Jonathan, 88, survived two waves of COVID-19 in Uganda. To avoid getting the disease, which can be severe in the elderly, the couple self-isolated at home for many months.

“We were scared; because, at our age, if you are not vaccinated and you get COVID, you die,” explains Gladys.

Gladys was eager to get vaccinated so she could safely see her grandchildren again. It had been too long since they had climbed into her lap. But while vaccinations were available in major health centers in the Kaliro District of Busoga region where the couple resides, the nearest facility was almost three miles from Gladys’s home. It might as well have been in another country; it was too far to walk, and the couple had no means of transportation.



Gladys Kahalwa gets the jab during a COVID-19 vaccine campaign in Kaliro district. / ©USAID RHITES-EC

In coordination with the Ministry of Health, USAID/Uganda and partners supported mass COVID-19 vaccination campaigns in Mayuge, Kaliro, and Kamuli districts, bringing services closer to vulnerable populations such as Gladys's family.

USAID's support to these campaigns was made possible by the Initiative for Global Vaccine Access (Global VAX), a whole-of-U.S. Government effort to contribute to the global goal of vaccinating 70% of the population against COVID-19 in 2022. In addition to building on the United States' commitment to donate more than 1.2 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses by the end of 2022, Global VAX also expands assistance and enhances international coordination to identify and rapidly overcome vaccine access barriers to turn vaccines in vials into vaccinations in arms.

During a campaign earlier this year, Global VAX helped to establish community vaccination points at churches, mosques, schools, markets, playgrounds, and other popular meeting places to bring vaccines closer to as many people as possible.



A nurse from Luuka district preparing to provide COVID-19 vaccinations. / ©USAID RHITES-EC

The Kaliro launch was held right in Gladys's neighborhood, only 600 feet from her home. She was overjoyed when she heard about it. So was another senior, Nabirye Joyce, 76, from Kimuli District, who looked visibly relieved after receiving her jab at a mass vaccination launch.

Letting out a long sigh, she said she now feels safer from COVID-19: "I knew anytime I could get it, and if I am not vaccinated, I would be in big trouble."

To extend vaccine access to an even larger population, USAID/Uganda provided vaccination teams with transportation so they could travel to some of the more remote villages in the Busoga region and enlisted community mobilizers to carry out health education campaigns specifically targeting unvaccinated households. To encourage even more citizens to get the jab, local leaders joined popular radio talk shows to promote vaccination.

Following these mobilization campaigns, community leaders reported a positive shift in attitudes about vaccination. In East Central Uganda, the number of eligible people who received a first dose of COVID-19 vaccine rose from 8 percent in October 2021 to 74% by April 2022 — a 975% increase in just six months. The number of eligible citizens fully vaccinated in the region rose to 65% over the same period.



Nabirye Joyce, 76, of Nabwigulu sub-county, Kamuli district receives her first jab. / ©USAID RHITES-EC

During this vaccination campaign, COVID-19 inoculation was integrated into popular health services, such as routine health outreach, to underserved communities during large events and religious gatherings. This broad community outreach has been critical for residents in remote districts and island communities, where a journey to the nearest health center with vaccines can take hours.

"We were blessed to find a vaccination point in our neighborhood," says Gladys as she approaches the outdoor tent where she will receive her vaccine. "Now we can resume our lives."

As of June 5, 2022, 50% of all Ugandans 18 and over are fully vaccinated, and Uganda is striving toward reaching the national goal of vaccinating 70% of eligible Ugandans by September 2022.



Left: Mbasa Genge, 86, of Namayingo district happily shows off his vaccination certificate. **Right:** Mugulusi mobilizes residents for vaccination in Buyende. / ©USAID RHITES-EC 2022

To continue to surge support to meet this goal, the United States donated an additional 2.5 million COVID-19 vaccine doses this month. These new doses bring the total U.S.-donated doses to 19 million — approximately 37% of the doses received in the country. As cases begin to rise again, turning these vaccines into vaccinations through Global VAX will protect Ugandans from severe COVID-19 infections and death.

From delivering vaccines, to disseminating public health information, to ensuring equitable access to vaccination, Global VAX and USAID work with countries’ Ministries of Health and other partners to pave the road to recovery. Worldwide, Global VAX works with more than 100 countries , with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa. to increase uptake of COVID-19 vaccines.

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About the Authors

Leslie Rose is a Communications Advisor for the Office of Health and HIV/AIDS at USAID’s Mission in Uganda. Keith Baleeta is a Technical Advisor for Performance Management and Operations Research with USAID RHITES-EC.



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