Women Leaders
Cornerstones of an Inclusive Democracy
Secretary of State Virtual Visit to Nigeria April 21 & 27, 2021

U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria Mary Beth Leonard, Nigerian Foreign Affairs Minister Geoffrey Onyeama and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken representing the Nigerian and American governments during the virtual visit.

Dr. Jeanfrances Chukwu of the Federal Medical Center Jabi interacts with Secretary Blinken during a virtual U.S.-Nigeria Health Partnership event.

Secretary Blinken participates in a virtual Q&A discussion celebrating the 10th Anniversary of the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) Network with 10 current network members and alumni from the Mandela Washington Fellowship (MWF) and Regional Leadership Centers (RLC) on April 21, 2021.

Foreign Affairs Minister Geoffrey Onyeama addresses the meeting virtually from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

President Muhammadu Buhari opened the diplomatic meeting with an address from the presidential villa.
Welcome to another edition of Crossroads.

It is so exciting to finally be able to reach you again through this medium. Globally and in Nigeria we’re still emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic and adapting to the many ways it has restructured and restricted our way of life. Despite the challenges, we have partnered in numerous ways to bolster the 60-year relationship between the United States and Nigeria. In the health sector, support ranged from vaccine donations, ventilators, and protective gear, to training a wide range of health care providers and system strengtheners. In this edition, you will read from several of our agencies focused on health and see the different capacities in which they contribute to ensure Covid-19 is completely brought under control in Nigeria.

Much has happened since the last issue of Crossroads. Most notably, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were elected by the American people as our 46th President and 49th Vice President. Kamala Harris became the first woman and person of color to occupy the office of the Vice President. We are proud that diversity and inclusion have come to the fore of all that we do; this serves as an important call for unity which I have shared with Nigerian counterparts throughout this great nation.

Life changed dramatically last year, even so far as to challenge the resilience of the human existence – but we refused to grind to a halt. Across the U.S. Mission, we continued to work tirelessly through lockdowns, social distancing, and remote working arrangements, keeping our personnel and friends safe. You’ll see our story of how we have continued to fulfill our mandate: to represent the United States and engage Nigerians as partners in order to strengthen democratic institutions for a more peaceful and prosperous Nigeria.

Please enjoy the read.

Mary Beth Leonard
Webinar Series Helps Journalists Covering COVID-19

By Temitayo Famutimi

To help the local media give reliable information about the coronavirus pandemic, the U.S. Consulate General in June 2020 organized a three-part webinar series titled “How to Report COVID-19.”


Nearly 71 health reporters and editors from nine major cities, including Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt, Calabar, Benin, Osogbo, Abeokuta, Akure and Owerri benefited from this effort. The participants represent a variety of media types – TV, radio, online and print media.

Declaring the webinar open, Deputy Chief of Mission Kathleen FitzGibbon highlighted the important role of the media in the ongoing battle against the coronavirus.

According to her, COVID-19 is a challenge to more than just medical personnel, especially to journalists who are responsible for keeping the public accurately informed so that people can take responsible action to slow the spread of this disease.

DCM FitzGibbon expressed the U.S. government’s commitment to support Nigeria in implementing effective health efforts and improve its capacity to safely isolate and treat confirmed COVID-19 cases.

Halilu Usman, Communications Specialist for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S. CDC Nigeria Country Office), also offered remarks on COVID-19 risk communication and social mobilization.

Over the course of the webinar series, Ms. Watcher provided participants with a range of tips and resources on how to overcome COVID-19 reporting challenges. The journalists learned the best practices in identifying and cultivating credible local and international sources in the absence of national health data and how to spot and fact-check COVID-19-related misinformation.

Watcher also offered great examples of enterprise reporting that incorporate the use of data and open-source investigative techniques to tell compelling COVID-19 stories. In addition, she highlighted the risks associated with stigmatization of those affected by COVID-19 and strategies to counter it.

The feedback from participants was uniformly positive and PAS views the workshop as a successful contribution to enhancing the professionalism of our media contacts and supports the Mission goal of helping to foster a healthier population in Nigeria.
Adeniyi professor of communication, Baze University, Abuja. Professor Sullivan spoke on “Democratic Government, The Press, and the Right to Know” while Dr. Adeniyi spoke on “Strengthening Institutions for Value – Adding Information Dissemination.” Over 300 journalists joined the discussion including from the U.S. Embassy American Spaces located in Abuja, Kano, Sokoto, Bauchi, Maiduguri and Jos. During the program participating journalists were able to ask questions on various aspects of press freedom and the practice of journalism.

Finally, Information Officer Jeanne Clark gave a keynote speech to the National Union of Campus Journalists World Press Freedom Day live-streamed discussion. These events highlighted the key role of journalists in providing information to the public going by the theme of the commemoration ‘Information as a Public Good.’

LAGOS
As the global community unites to fight against COVID-19, the Consulate General in Lagos on May 3 organized a webinar to commemorate the 2021 World Press Freedom Day.

The webinar titled, “Frontiers of Health Reporting: New Insights, Fresh Perspectives” had in attendance more than 130 working level journalists from TV, radio, online and print media.

Declaring the webinar open, Consul General Claire Pierangelo highlighted the important role of a free press in a democracy. She challenged the participants to continue to play an effective role in amplifying important issues that affect citizens.

“The United States government will continue to emphasize the value of promoting and protecting a free press, because the media plays such an essential role in preserving democracy and, as we can witness these days, in providing information that saves lives,” the Consul General told the participating journalists.

The two-hour program featured four local speakers including Fisayo Soyombo, Founder/Editor Foundation for Investigative Journalism; Joshua Olufemi, Executive Director at Dataphyte; Abel Akeni Head of Research and Policy Advisory at BudgIT; and Oluwamayowa Tijani, Fact-Checking Journalist at Agence France-Presse. Channels TV Foreign Affairs Editor Amarachi Ubani moderated the webinar.

The speakers took turns to discuss how to better incorporate data into health reporting, data visualization tools, spotting and fact checking disinformation as well as best practices in overcoming challenges of telling impactful investigative health stories.

Feedback from the participants was uniformly positive. They expressed commitment to provide more accurate information to Nigerians who will benefit from improved reporting on health, governance, and other crucial issues.
Women Leaders
Cornerstones of an Inclusive Democracy

By Jeanne Clark

Then Democratic presidential candidate, Kamala Harris as she toured an unfinished building on Nov 9, 2019.
Photo: John Locher/Associated Press
arrived with much fanfare and optimism. The United States emerged from a hotly contested presidential election where the voter turn-out had never been higher. It was exhilarating to see more Americans had voted than at any other time this century, with the biggest increase in the voting population from 2016 being the 18 – 34 age range. The stakes were high and citizens from every corner of the country responded to the call, exercised their civic duty, and voted. While there are many interesting aspects of the presidential election ranging from the accuracy of mail-in voting to the role of race, one headline remains emblazoned in memory, "How Women Voters Decided the 2020 Election."

For the first time in history the United States inaugurated a female vice president. In the 21st century it doesn’t seem that it should be extraordinary that a woman was elected to this position, but it was. Economic models across the globe have proven time and time again that when women are employed, their earnings support the health and education of the family. We at the U.S. Mission are proud to serve with Ambassador Mary Beth Leonard and Deputy Chief of Mission Kathleen FitzGibbon, who earned State Department global recognition this year as the best in this position worldwide. It is equally satisfying to engage with Nigerian women in key government positions. We were delighted to meet with the new Nigerian Ambassador to the United States Uzoma Ikechi Emenike, and the new Consul to Atlanta Amina Smaila Amira. Yet the reality exists that despite relatively equal numbers in our vast populations, the numbers of women elected into office pale in comparison. It is time for a change, and women leaders must be welcomed in all facets of representational government.

As the first U.S. Vice President to ever address the United Nations, Kamala Harris boldly proclaimed, "The status of women is the status of democracy." The participation of women strengthens democracy, and democracy requires constant vigilance and constant improvement. These are undertakings and challenges that we share with Nigeria. We are proud to stand side by side with Nigerians across this nation and address healthcare, education, economic growth and security challenges. We've been here for sixty years engaging Nigerian youth, inspiring entrepreneurs, and sharing learned experience because democracy matters.

No one has written about this quest more poignantly than American poet laureate Amanda Gorman:

When day comes we step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid
The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it
If only we're brave enough to be it
As the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to overwhelm Nigeria’s health system last June, several U.S. agencies teamed with governments in nine states to ensure their health providers were well equipped to monitor the emerging situations across states and provide appropriate responses to rising caseloads.

As the crisis grew, Nigeria’s best vehicle to mitigate a host of risks to effectively identifying, tracking, and treating COVID-19 cases was a series of state level Emergency Operations Centers (EOC) which provided opportunities for data warehousing, integration, utilization, and visualization for disease outbreaks.

These centers, which allow for centralized, real-time decision-making and ability to promptly deploy health personnel, facilitated the successful management of thousands of suspected COVID-19 cases.

But these EOCs were in varying states of repair and functionality. With funding of 420 million naira ($1.1 million), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) upgraded and expanded the capacity of nine centers in Adamawa, Akwa Ibom, Bauchi, Bayelsa, Cross River, Edo, Kano, Niger, and Oyo states.

USAID was provided the opportunity to support state-led efforts and utilized unused spaces that the states identified to establish the EOCs while also building on lessons learned from existing PEPFAR and polio infrastructures in several states.

In many situations, these unused spaces were abandoned and left bare. USAID equipped these spaces with multimedia and audiovisual equipment and data visualization software and furniture as well as 24-hour solar-powered virtual situation rooms.

The EOCs have served as congregation points for state public health personnel and related health authorities to actively respond to issues in the strategic management of the COVID-19 response.

The upgrades powered and coordinated state responses to COVID-19 and other endemic disease outbreaks through data integration, warehousing, and visualization. This provided health
officials with transparent and real-time information on trends that helped states create awareness on prevention and minimized the impact of the virus, resulting in an improvement in the quality of the responses.

After the establishment of the EOCs, one state recorded an average of 38 calls per day, consistently for a three-week period before settling into a steady pace, sometimes up to 18 calls daily. The callers who are state residents continue to be provided key prevention information and are linked to necessary services.

"With these EOCs, Nigeria can better coordinate the COVID-19 outbreak response and surveillance, as well as any other emergent disease outbreaks or disasters," U.S. Ambassador Mary Beth Leonard said at the first virtual gathering to mark the commissioning of the centers.

Over the last two decades, the United States has invested more than $8 billion in the Nigerian health sector. The COVID response through USAID is built on these previous investments in HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis control, among other health investments.

Drawing on lessons from the Ebola outbreak in 2014, USAID, in collaboration with other American agencies, also moved swiftly to support the establishment of Nigeria’s COVID-19 Presidential Task Force (PTF) of public health experts to guide the response. The U.S. has embedded 65 specialists from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and USAID within the PTF to help strengthen response to the pandemic.

The support helped Nigeria build epidemiology and surveillance capabilities, enhanced laboratory operations, strengthened infection prevention and control, and improved case management. Through a partnership with telecoms giant Airtel, the United States also helped develop risk communications and social mobilization.

To date, the U.S. has donated more than $73 million in equipment and technical assistance, including a mobile field hospital, 200 ventilators, COVID detection surveys, personal protective equipment, rapid response teams, and training of military and civilian personnel.

Anne E. Patterson
Mission Director, USAID Nigeria

Anne Patterson joined USAID/Nigeria in August 2020. She began her career with USAID in 1992 as an American Association for the Advancement of Science Fellow in the Near East Bureau where she worked on water and wastewater issues. She was sworn in as a career Foreign Service officer in 1994 and served tours in Egypt, Indonesia, West Bank Gaza, Iraq, Georgia, and the Europe and Eurasia Bureau in Washington. Most recently, she served as the Deputy Mission Director to USAID/Egypt and Mission Director to USAID/Lebanon. Patterson has a Ph.D. in Environmental Health from Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and an M.S.P.H. from the University of South Carolina.
Mr. Yaro Oyinloye, a staff of Institute of Human Virology Nigeria (IHVN) one of CDC Nigeria implementing partners, conducting HIV testing during a COVID-19/HIV community testing outreach in Abuja, Nigeria.

CDC Nigeria implementing partners, Caritas Nigeria staff conducting HIV Testing Services at St. Anthony’s Parish, Enugu-Ezike, Enugu State, Nigeria.
One of the major goals of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Nigeria is to support the country to achieve HIV epidemic control. To achieve this goal, CDC and the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) launched the Nigeria Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) Surge, in 2019, with the aim of rapidly accelerating progress toward HIV epidemic control in Nigeria.

The initial goal was to increase the number of HIV infected people with access to treatment through PEPFAR treatment program by 500,000 over 18 months (from April 2019 to September 2020). That is, we wanted to find and place 500,000 people living with HIV on treatment who were not previously on treatment.

To help us find these people, we used the results of our earlier supported Nigeria HIV/AIDS Indicator and Impact Survey (NAIIS), which ensured we had our first accurate view of where people living with HIV were in the country. Importantly, we were also able to understand the distribution of those living with HIV who were not on treatment.

Among the 18 Nigerian states supported by PEPFAR through CDC, CDC used the NAIIS results to select nine states with the largest number of people living with HIV who were not on treatment. Those states were: Benue, Delta, Enugu, Federal Capital Territory, Gombe, Imo, Lagos, Nasarawa, and Rivers.

The ART Surge was hugely successful in changing the story of HIV in Nigeria. During the Surge, the weekly number of persons with newly identified HIV infections who initiated HIV treatment increased approximately eightfold, from 587 in early May 2019 to over 5,300 by end of September 2020. Compared with March 2019, 208,202 more persons were receiving PEPFAR-supported ART in September 2020. This phenomenal result is despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the ART Surge increased the number of people living with HIV on PEPFAR-supported treatment by almost 500,000 across all PEPFAR-supported states from April 2019 to December 2020.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was important to ensure recent progress toward HIV epidemic control in Nigeria was not negatively impacted.

Following Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) guidelines, the ART Surge program implemented COVID-19 mitigation measures, including the provision of facemasks for staff, enhanced hand hygiene by staff and clients during clinical visits, and social distancing measures, such as staggered clinical appointments and 2-meter spacing between seats.

Given limitations in facility-based services, community-based activities were increased through mobile teams, toward strengthened case finding, ART initiation, and patient retention. Inherent use of emergency public health response approaches, including incident command structures and weekly data reviews, allowed for a seamless adaptation of strategies from state to state and from one facility to another.

CDC continues to work with the Government of Nigeria at the national and state levels to reach as many people living with HIV as possible, making sure they are linked to treatment, and sustaining them on treatment so their virus can be suppressed to undetectable levels. This will accelerate progress toward controlling the HIV epidemic in Nigeria. HIV treatment is effective for patients. When taken correctly under the advice of a clinician, it greatly lowers the chances of a person living with HIV becoming ill or dying from HIV-related causes.

By Halilu Usman
The United States Department of Defense (U.S. DoD) has been a committed partner in mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, promoting infection prevention, enhancing patient care, building the capacity of healthcare workers, and bolstering testing services.

As an immediate and tangible contribution to the response, the U.S. provided personal protective equipment (PPE) to over 40 Nigerian military health facilities and three civilian health facilities in 18 states. These commodities – such as masks, gowns, and gloves – were procured with over $300,000 in funding from the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), the Joint West Africa Research Group, and the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Because of this support, healthcare workers and laboratorians across the country have been better protected against potential COVID-19 infection. To formalize the gesture, a ceremonial handover of a proportion of these PPE to the Nigerian military took place on November 5, 2020, at 063 Nigerian Air Force Hospital (NAFH) in Abuja, where the Permanent Secretary to the Nigerian Ministry of Defence (NMOD) Alhaji Babangida Hussaini, and the U.S. Charge d’Affaires Kathleen...
FitzGibbon, presided.

The U.S. DoD, also supported through AFRICOM, worked closely with the Nigerian Ministry of Health to establish a mobile treatment unit for COVID-19 in Abuja. The unit, a $1.3 million, 40-bed, negative air pressure facility, was commissioned by the Honorable Minister of Health Dr. Osagie Ohanire, and the U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria Mary Beth Leonard, on January 22, 2021. The establishment of this facility is timely, with Abuja having been greatly affected by the second wave of COVID-19 in the country.

In partnership with the NMOD Health Implementation Programme (MODHIP) - the implementation arm of the Nigerian military COVID-19 response – the U.S. DoD has supported the establishment of a COVID-19 treatment center located at the 063 Nigerian Air Force Hospital (NAFH), Abuja. 063 NAFH was inaugurated by the Honorable Minister of Health Dr. Ohanire in June 2020 to serve as the primary military COVID-19 isolation and treatment center in Abuja. It has actively contributed to the national response by admitting and treating military and civilian COVID-19 infected persons. The partnership has also ensured the quality of patient care in this facility and other military facilities across the country by training over 150 health personnel on COVID-19 case management and infection prevention control.

Finally, a central component of the partnership’s response to the pandemic is its role in strengthening testing for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. With support from the U.S. DoD, MODHIP established six COVID-19 sample collection sites in Abuja, Makurdi, Onne, Ojo, and Port Harcourt, and has worked jointly with the Armed Forces COVID-19 Committee, the Nigerian Centers of Disease Control, the Nigerian Tuberculosis and Leprosy Center and multiple United States government agencies for integration of military labs into the COVID-19 laboratory network. The pinnacle of this effort is the contribution by the Defence Reference Laboratory in Abuja, co-staffed by NMOD and DoD. As of February 19, 2021, DRL has tested more than 19,000 COVID-19 samples from across the country.

Succor at lockdown

The NMOD-U.S DoD program provides HIV prevention, care, & treatment to People Living with HIV & AIDS (PLHIV) at 40 military facilities through PEPFAR support. In advancing the U.S. government mission, and to mitigate the spread of HIV and COVID-19, U.S. DoD protected the health of tens of thousands of HIV patients during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. It supported Nigerian military health facilities to continue to provide HIV/AIDS prevention, care and treatment services, in spite of the movement restrictions imposed by the Nigerian government. It developed innovative means to enhance access to care and essential medication, and simultaneously protect the nurses, physicians, and laboratorians working with patients on a daily basis from COVID-19 infection.

Notwithstanding the lockdown, the NMOD-US DoD HIV program achieved over 98% client retention across all sites with over 70% of patients on multi-month drug dispensing. Similarly, its laboratories have continued to provide sustained services for HIV viral load testing with over 93% viral load coverage and suppression. The partnership also developed guidelines to support data management activities for PEPFAR during the lockdown, and implemented the DHIS2 tracker program for tracking patient management, viral load coverage and suppression, patient mortality, and retention.
Art Forms as Therapy and Mental Health Interventions

By Blessing Abbah

In line with its mission to promote health awareness and access, the U.S. Embassy Abuja, in collaboration with the Arts Envoy program, hosted a series of Art therapy workshops for paramilitary agencies. The program commenced on April 27, 2021 with an interagency roundtable discussion on the use of arts to meet the mental health challenges of paramilitary personnel, hosted at the Force Headquarters. The workshops were held with representatives from the Nigerian Police Force, Nigerian Immigration Service, Federal Fire Service, Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps, Nigerian Correctional Service, and the Nigerian Customs Service to explore art therapy as an alternative for addressing underlying mental health issues especially drug abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The series of workshops will end on May 25, 2021.

Two U.S. art envoys and art therapists, Roman Baca and Francisco Graciano explored the use of art interventions to meet the mental health challenges of today's paramilitary personnel, and shared art therapy best practices for engaging officers. As first responders and with the current global trends in mental health challenges faced by paramilitary officers, this program presented an opportunity to provide a healthy alternative for release and healing for key officers.

The envoys conducted writing and movement virtual workshops, along with training on the use of photography for healing. Participants connected virtually from Abuja, the American Spaces in Kano, Maiduguri, Jos, and Sokoto. The Envoy provided a safe space for participants to share their personal experiences and address individual concerns.

The project took place every Tuesday over the course of five weeks, and also reached artists, recovery centers and medical practitioners whose participants gained awareness of the power of art therapy interventions, and went on to share what they learned with their communities.

The Arts Envoy Program engages American artists and arts professionals in cultural exchange programs and shares the best of the American arts community with the world to foster cross-cultural understanding and collaboration, to demonstrate shared values and aspirations, and to address foreign policy themes and objectives.
Officers of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corp engaged in an Art Therapy session sponsored by the U.S. State Department Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs Art Envoys program.

The Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer, Malia Heroux meeting the Commandant General, Abdullahi Gana Mohammadu of the NSCDC.

Staff of the Nigerian Correctional Service engaged in movement training.

A participant at the workshop sharing an assignment with art therapist and program speaker, Francisco Graciano.

Staff of the Nigerian Correctional Service pose with program coordinator, Blessing Abbah (center) after a session.

Art envoy and program speaker, Roman Baca leads art practitioner participants in activities during the workshop.
Supporting Resilience in the Education Sector

By Diran Agegoke

COVID-19 started out like a whisper. Later it made its way into the media, and before long became the only thing everyone talked about. The pandemic led to shutdowns around the world in varying degrees, with travel, tourism, and education being some of the sectors affected the most. In Nigeria, like most organizations, a lot of schools tried to pivot to virtual platforms but struggled due to a lack of the technological structure and poor familiarity with the virtual system of learning.

This informed the decision of the Mandela Washington Fellowship Alumni Association of Nigeria (MWFAAN) to focus the fifth edition of its Beyond School Community Challenge (BSCC) Competition on leveraging innovation and technology to promote equitable and quality education. BSCC is a national hackathon for high school students designed to help hone critical entrepreneurial skills while creating impact within their communities. Guided by mentors from the alumni association, the students identify the challenge in their community and proffer viable entrepreneurial concepts to address the challenges. Through the support of the U.S. Mission in Nigeria, the top three projects receive seed funding to implement their proposals.

This year’s challenge had 10 finalists emerge from a pool of 100 applicants, the finals took place on the Saturday October 24, 2020 with Madison Conoley - Cultural Affairs Officer - leading a panel of five judges that include Bala Steven (CEO of DH Consulting NG), Takuro Gbemisola (a social enterprise consultant), Sam Ekwuribe and Ajoke Omaware (MWF alumni). Team Artechubs from Anambra State emerged the overall winners, while Team Dauntless of Niger state and Team Surge of Benue State were runners-up. Team Artechubs’ winning project called Foris Labs is a virtual learning space that allows students conduct science experiments interactively by using a web platform to simulate laboratory experiments from mobile phones and laptops. While announcing the winner, Mr. Conoley noted that “the judges had a hard time selecting the winner because each team produced really strong projects.” Mr. Conoley also encouraged other teams that didn’t win any prize to continue to think about how to positively impact their communities.
The U.S. Embassy’s Public Affairs Section (PAS) in Abuja conducted various interventions across northern Nigeria to support the Government of Nigeria’s efforts in creating awareness and educating the public, especially those at the grassroots, on the realities of the novel coronavirus.

The importance of spreading credible information on the virus cannot be overemphasized. It is only when the population understands the devastating impact of the coronavirus on the health of individuals and the community as a whole they would engage in positive health seeking behaviours to protect themselves and their loved ones. The core objective was to widely amplify health and safety protocols issued by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and the World Health Organization.

Through partnership with non-governmental organizations, the PAS approach involved a series of messaging campaigns on radio, TV, print and social media to produce fact-checked information and counter myths that deny the existence of the virus, form conspiracy theories on the origins of the virus, and promote propaganda alleging political corruption. Using a multimedia mix of jingles, talk shows, video snippets and comedy skits produced in 15 local languages, the messages were presented by traditional and religious leaders along with local influencers and celebrities. The campaigns also featured policy makers, emergency response teams, health professionals and recovered patients who shared testimonials. In Borno State for example, the radio show had a call-in segment where citizens engaged with officials of the NCDC.

In addition to these activities, PAS supported the training of over a hundred health care workers on infection prevention and control in Gombe State. Through a grant to a local NGO, PAS partnered with the Kano State Quranic and Islamiyya Schools Management Board to train over 4,000 Almajiri pupils on health and safety protocols, while providing water tanks in learning centers to promote handwashing. Other forms of intervention include virtual trainings for religious actors to support interfaith action on the development and implementation of community safety plans on COVID-19 information and response. These are among many other U.S. Mission efforts to help curb the spread of the virus and ensure a healthier population for human capital development in the region and country as a whole.
Opportunity Funds Scholar Conducts COVID-19 Related Research Projects
By Chinenye Uwadileke

Izunna Udebuana Okpala has a Bachelor’s degree in Information Technology from the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO). He also graduated as the best MSc student in the school with a distinction. With nine international papers and two local publications to his name, Izunna is also an approved reviewer in Springer Open, having reviewed several publications in the Journal of Big Data.

In 2019, Izunna was selected out of over 500 students who applied to the Lagos Opportunity Funds Program. He worked with his EducationUSA advisers to apply to graduate schools and received a fully funded Ph.D. offer from the University of Cincinnati (UC) worth over $40,000 per year.

He is currently working on his Ph.D. in Information Technology with an emphasis on Machine Learning and Natural Language Processing. Using the skills he is gaining, Izunna is also involved in two health-related research projects.

The first is COVIDBOTNET: A convolutional neural network (CNN)-Based Robust Architecture for COVID-19 Diagnosis with CT-Scans. In this research, Izunna, in collaboration with international researchers from Korea built a machine learning system that also features a Q and A bot (a symptom index program). These features help inform self-isolation recommendations and to prevent the further spread of the virus.

His second research with his advisor at UC focuses on people’s attitudes towards the COVID-19 vaccination. They are adopting a machine learning mechanism in studying user perception about the COVID-19 vaccination. Key deliverables include the reasons why some groups of people would like to be vaccinated but other groups would not. What they are studying is whether social media has proven to be viable in terms of providing actionable data from people of diverse backgrounds.

Only in his first semester of his doctoral degree, Izunna is proud to have the opportunity to be working on cutting-edge research on issues of global health relevance.
Introducing the new PAS Officers

Jeanne Clark
Information Officer/Press Attaché
Jeanne Clark currently serves as the Spokesperson for the U.S. Mission in Nigeria managing strategic communications. She previously served as the Public Affairs Officer in Port au Prince Haiti (2017 – 2020), Deputy Director of the Bureau of International Organizations, Office of Public Affairs, Planning and Coordination in Washington, DC (2015 – 2017).

Jennifer Foltz
Deputy Public Affairs Officer, Lagos
Jenny serves as the Deputy Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Consulate General in Lagos, Nigeria. Previously, she served as the Public Affairs Officer for the Office of Haitian Affairs and the Office of Canadian Affairs.

Madison Conoley
Cultural Affairs Officer, Abuja
Madison joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1998. He currently serves as the Cultural Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Abuja and holds the diplomatic rank of First Secretary. Mr. Conoley previously served as the Senior Advisor to the Principal Deputy Coordinator of the Global Engagement Center in Washington.

He holds a Juris Doctor degree from Lewis & Clark Law School (1997) and a Master of Arts degree in Strategic Security Studies from the National Defense University (2017). A Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (Benin), Mr. Conoley and his wife Jennifer have two children.

Stephen Ibelli
Public Affairs Officer, Lagos
Stephen Ibelli comes to Lagos having most recently served in several assignments in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. In his most recent assignment as Public Affairs Officer in Munich, Germany, he managed all public engagement for the Consulate.

In his capacity as a Foreign Service Officer, Stephen has served as spokesperson for the U.S. Embassy to Libya, Director of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Regional Offices in Tunisia and Morocco and Public Diplomacy Officer in Najaf, Iraq.

Prior to a career in Diplomacy, Stephen spent a decade in the private sector in Saudi Arabia and Equatorial Guinea with Raytheon and ExxonMobil, specializing in training and development of national employees.
The status of women is the status of democracy.

Kamala Harris