

Short-Form Case Study

Strengthening Capacity for AIDS Vaccine Research: the Pfizer Global Health Fellows Program and the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative

More than 34 million HIV-infected individuals live in East and Southern Africa, creating an enormous burden for health systems and a challenge for development. Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and industry all have an interest in stopping the spread of HIV. Many are combining their efforts through partnerships designed to respond to the challenges of vaccine research, service delivery, and policy advocacy.

Pfizer Corporation's Global Health Fellows (GHF) program is one of the first and most comprehensive partnerships to use international corporate volunteering to build capacity of international and African NGOs in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Since 2002 over 250 Fellows have worked in 40 countries. Fellows are selected to participate in the program through a competitive process at Pfizer, with partner organizations designing the field assignments.

In 2005, Pfizer began working with the International AIDS Vaccine Institute (IAVI) to further the development of safe and effective vaccines to prevent AIDS. From 2005 to 2009, a dozen Pfizer Fellows worked with IAVI and local research centers in South Africa, Kenya and Uganda to strengthen capacity to conduct and monitor vaccine trials to meet international standards and expand trial activities. Fellows filled critical short-term expert staffing needs at IAVI and provided technical assistance and staff development activities. The factors which made this partnership so successful can help guide other programs designed to build capacity for HIV response and to expand life-saving research on deadly diseases like HIV/AIDS.

IAVI's Mission

IAVI collaborates with clinical research centers, pharmaceutical companies, and other partners in 25 countries to support development of an AIDS vaccine. An important component of IAVI's strategy is to conduct vaccine research and clinical trials in developing countries—areas most affected by the pandemic—while meeting rigorous international standards.

In 2005, IAVI had few research partners and clinical centers in Southern and East Africa, and was heavily reliant on contract research organizations for trial-related functions such as training and monitoring. While IAVI had been involved in several scientific studies and had completed three HIV vaccine trials, the organization did not have a lot of experience managing multiple trials and trial centers at once.

IAVI staff understood that in order to reach their goal of expanding HIV/AIDS clinical trial research in Africa, they needed to further develop the skills of African investigators, approach new partner organizations, and prepare research centers to meet the high standards required for clinical trials. To ensure the timeliness of trial progress, the integrity of data, and the safety of trial participants, IAVI also needed to ramp up training, and bring trial monitoring in-house.



Pfizer Assistance

Pfizer Fellows were assigned to work with IAVI through regional and country offices, and with the clinical trial centers run by partner organizations in Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa. In some cases, Fellows also traveled to other locations such as Zambia and Rwanda. GHF provided technical assistance in four areas: center preparation, training, monitoring, and data management. The first two types of assistance tended to be focused on increasing local partners' capacity to perform international standard clinical trials, while the latter two activities were targeted toward building IAVI's capacity to monitor multiple field trials at once.

The Fellows built capacity by establishing operating procedures for the start-up period of research centers, training staff in good clinical practice (GCP), developing capacity to monitor trials and assure that centers are audit-ready at all times, and creating strategies for effective management of trial data. One IAVI field supervisor described the benefits of Pfizer capacity strengthening in training: *"We used to outsource trainings for the Africa network, but at a significant cost. The Fellows helped us to transition from this outsourced model to an in-sourced operation. We fully made the transition and no longer go outside for training resources. This has meant tremendous cost savings for IAVI."*

Another IAVI director spoke about the result of GHF assistance in the Africa region: *"In the last 6 months alone, we have vaccinated 300 people and we are monitoring it all ourselves, as opposed to using contracted monitors. So this is an example of how the capacity building has been not just for the local partners, but for IAVI Africa as well."*

Factors Affecting the Success of the Program

Pfizer Fellows and IAVI supervisors reflected on factors which helped make their partnership and the international volunteering program successful, including similarities in mission between IAVI and Pfizer; the expertise, experience, and perspective of Fellows; and attitudes of local partner staff. IAVI and local partners were open to change and focused on organizational learning. This helped create the trust and motivation to implement and sustain the changes introduced by Fellows.

Conclusion

International corporate volunteering programs like the Pfizer Global Health Fellows program can have a positive impact on capacity building for international and local NGO partners. By developing standard operating procedures, ensuring that monitoring and regulatory compliance systems were in place, training African investigators and community members, and engaging in other systems strengthening activities, GHF has helped IAVI to accelerate vaccine development activities in the field, and to develop the organization's capacity to manage change in the future.