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At 3GSM, a partnership to use cell phones for health efforts in the developing world

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Mindful of the spread of HIV and AIDS worldwide, the U.S. government along with several mobile phone industry companies have announced a new US\$10 million (€7.7 billion) initiative to utilize cell phone coverage in the developing world to bolster health systems.

Called Phones-for-Health, the public-private partnership brings together network operators, handset makers and technology companies with health groups and government offices.

"The explosive spread of mobile phone networks across the developing world has created a unique opportunity to significantly transform how countries can tackle global health challenges," said Dr. Howard Zucker, assistant director-general of the World Health Organization.

The partners in the initiative — the GSM Association's Development Fund; the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR; Accenture Development Partnership; Motorola Inc., MTN and Voxiva — will initially focus on 10 African countries, building on an already successful deployment in Rwanda.

As time passes, the partnership is expected to be extended in Africa and Asia to address diseases like tuberculosis, malaria and other infectious diseases.

"People living with HIV in the developing world deserve high-quality treatment and care, and this innovative partnership will ensure that health workers and program managers get the timely, relevant information they need — even when they serve patients in the most remote areas," said Mark Dybul, the U.S. Global AIDS coordinator.

The program equips health workers in the field with a Motorola-made phone that is equipped with an application that lets them enter health data on patients. Then that information is sent by way of GPRS to a central database. If a GPRS network is not available, it can be sent via short message service, or text.

The data is analyzed and mapped by the system and then made immediately available to health officials on the Internet.

The system also supports the sending of text message alerts and other information to staff in the field.

"Health workers will also be able to use the system to order medicine, send alerts, download



treatment guidelines, training materials and access other appropriate information," said Paul Meyer, chairman of Voxiva, the company that has designed the software. "Managers at the regional and national level can access information in real-time via a Web-based database."

In some African countries, there is a definite lack of fixed-line Internet connections and most documents and forms are still done on paper.

But, the GSMA, the alliance representing the world's wireless industry, estimates that more than 60 percent of Africans live in areas with mobile phone coverage, a figure it expects to increase to 85 percent by the end of the decade as more infrastructure is developed.

"Rapid and accurate communications channels are crucial to tackling the many health problems faced by African countries and other parts of the developing world," said Rob Conway, chief executive of the GSM Association, which stages the 3GSM Congress. "The rollout of this health management software in Africa will clearly demonstrate how governments can exploit the expanding mobile infrastructure to enhance the well-being of their citizens."

Roodeport, South Africa-based MTN Group Ltd. will support the rollout of the phones and the data service that is installed on them.

The company operates in 21 countries in Africa and the Middle East and is the first operator to partner with the program.

The program has already some success in Rwanda, using a system designed by Washington-based Voxia Inc. called TRACNet. Working with that country's government and PEPFAR, the system has been in use for the past two years to help manage Rwanda's national HIV and AIDS program.

"This technology is revolutionizing how data is captured in the field," said Dr. Louis Munyakaze, director general of Rwanda's National Institute of Statistics.

Agnes Binagwaho said that like TRACNet, the expanded program can give health workers more tools for their efforts.

"Health care workers use something as simple as a cell-phone, even where there is no electricity, to report on the number of patients on treatment, drug stock levels and the other key data we need," she said of efforts in Rwanda. "We believe this can be a model for scaling up HIV/AIDS programs across Africa."

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