

Congratulations to Dr. Leonid Lecca and the mighty Socios En Salud team! 25 years of partnership and progress is a tremendous organizational milestone.

My name is Dr. Maxo Luma. I came to Liberia in 2014 to join the Ebola response and have been serving as the Executive Director since November 2019. Over the past seven years in Liberia – and across a 15+ year journey that started with *Zanme Lasante* in Haiti – I’ve come to realize what *pragmatic solidarity* really means. It is about connecting with patients, communities and providers. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder *and* committing yourself to see things through, no matter what it takes. It’s refusing to accept less than what is deserved: elevating the standard of care, extending coverage, increasing healthcare access and utilization for all. Whether I’m serving our DR-TB patients, mentoring new clinicians or providing technical advice to the Ministry– my faith in what we’re doing and why we’re doing it is unwavering. Our model works. We are innovators, system builders and accompagnateurs.

Every day, I’m inspired by our patients (affectionately referred to as our “bosses”) – they continue to fight for health and wellness, seeking care in places where even getting to the health center is a challenge. I’m encouraged by our clinicians, who understand what it means to build systems and put human rights first. I’m incredibly proud that during Ebola, and now COVID-19, we haven’t let outbreaks distract us. We’ve demonstrated that the way to deliver a *preferential option for the poor* is to adapt and innovate so that primary care is accessible to those who need it most.

The strength of OnePIH makes this beautiful work possible – the friendships, lessons learned, and systems. Every day you work for PIH, whether in Peru or Liberia, you reaffirm the belief that everyone, everywhere deserves high quality, dignified healthcare. You recognize that universal health coverage is attainable when it is designed and implemented in partnership with governments. As a young site, we are inspired by the depth and breadth of your programming. SES’s example motivates and challenges us, particularly as we help to grow the government’s DR-TB program!

As we hear reflections from your team from the last 25 years, we’d also like to share progress that we’re celebrating across each of the 5 Ss: staff, stuff, space, systems and social support.

Staff

Capacity building is central to our shared vision for a stronger, resilient health system and a key pillar of PIH Liberia’s strategic plan. As a partner to the Ministry of Health, we invest in the next generation of healthcare leaders by providing pre-service, in-service and continuous professional development opportunities. Over the last several years, we have supported Tubman University in its efforts to accredit its nursing program and worked alongside the Liberia College of Physicians and Surgeons (LCPS) to provide a rural rotation site for family medicine residents and interns at JJ Dossen Hospital in Maryland County. In partnership with the Liberian Board of Nursing and Midwifery, we have helped to develop online Continuing Professional Development modules and decentralize national board exams. Even during COVID-19, we are well positioned and eager to support training for additional clinical specialties, including: laboratory technicians, biomedical engineers, data managers and public health specialists. At the national level, our participation in nursing training programs and the Health Workforce Thematic Working Group allow us to champion our “patients-first” approach to care delivery and ensure the next generation of Liberian health workers is guided by a rights-based approach to care delivery and a commitment to dignified care.

As health equity advocates, we recognize that investments in the health workforce must extend beyond clinical capacity building to the broader spectrum of human resources necessary to keep the health system strong. Investments in our team include study support scholarships and mentorship, and engage PIH Liberia staff from all departments. Currently, PIH Liberia is supporting staff to study Masters degrees in Public Health, Human Resource Management, and Business Administration, as well as Bachelors in Public Health and Financial Management. By supporting our staff to study and develop these essential technical skills, we are building the next generation of Liberian leaders within PIH and Liberia’s health workforce.

Stuff

In the last year, PIH Liberia procured oxygen concentrators, a new GeneXpert Machine, Rapid Diagnostic Tests for COVID-19, and materials for Infection Prevention and Control to support the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 Response. These tools and technology have saved lives. Most importantly, this support is on top of all the "stuff" we provide to deliver quality primary care every single day. All the medicines and medical equipment our patients need, all the technology for data collection and analysis – these tools equip our team with the ability to provide care when people need it, whether or not there is a global pandemic.



Space

In April 2020, just as the world was beginning to understand the reality of COVID-19, PIH Liberia broke ground on the new Emergency Department at Pleebo Health Center in Maryland County. After a year of intense work by our Infrastructure and Operations teams, we're proud to say that the department will be completed by August of this year. This new ward will stand alongside our brand new Maternal and Child Health department at Pleebo Health Center and our in-progress road development to the Emergency Department at JJD Hospital. These infrastructural investments provide essential space for our staff and stuff, and so much more. When you have the proper space, you can provide dignified care. When you have proper roads, you make that care accessible. Our patients deserve accessibility and dignity, and space makes it all possible.



Rear view. Current status as of June 9, 2021, painting works ongoing, septic tank construction ongoing in the foreground

Systems

At PIH Liberia, we aspire towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC). Every time we expand and improve on our systems, we get closer to achieving UHC, where 90% of the time people can get the care they need when they need it. Efficient, resilient, and responsive systems make this possible. Alongside our Ministry of Health and County Health Team partners, we have built referral systems and pathways to connect rural patients with clinical care. Championed by our Community Health team, we've designed, scaled-up, and advocated for a system for household-based care delivery to ensure maximum coverage and accessibility to care. As a pioneer in laboratory systems strengthening in Liberia, we've developed and implemented systems to enhance laboratory testing and diagnosis, utilizing a "hub and spoke" model where our support extends to other counties across Liberia's Southeast. We've built systems data analysis using PowerBI, allowing us to build a culture of data-driven decision making that allows us to evaluate our progress and refine our approach. On top of all of this, during COVID-19 we built systems for triage and infection prevention and control to keep our team, patients, and partners safe.



Bernice Nimely beaming with smiles after handing over a social support package to a patient in Karluway of Maryland County. © PIH/Kyle Daniels

Social Support

The Fifth S is the secret sauce in care delivery that distinguishes our approach. Social support is housing, food, transportation, and accompaniment. Social support allows us to break barriers that prevent patients from accessing the care they need. From July 2020 to June 2021, we've provided transportation assistance to an average of 771 patients per month. When we provide transportation reimbursements, people come for their appointments. Food is medicine.

Over the same period, we have seen an increase in the number of patients needing social support (increasing from 277 in July 2020 to 446 in May 2021).

When we provide medication and food to take it with, people continue their treatment, and people heal. When we support patients in quarantine or after a crisis by caring for their loved ones and ensuring no one goes hungry. For us,

social support is a call to service that recognizes the humanity in others. During COVID, we partnered with GiveDirectly to pilot an innovative, contact-less unconditional cash transfer program for 96 DR-TB patients enrolled in care at TB Annex. The program was designed to provide emergency support (\$48 per month) to patients who would be most vulnerable to severe COVID-19 complications, if infected, for a period of six months. 26.3% of primary recipients were 18-29 years old, 33.7% of recipients were between the ages of 30-39. The oldest recipient enrolled in this program was 79 years old. In more than 60.3% of follow-ups, recipients reported spending some of their transfer on food; in 31.3%, recipients reported buying things for an existing business or starting a new business (11.2%), and in 11.7% of follow-ups, recipients spent some of their transfer on medical/ health related issues. Remarkably, despite these transfers being sized to cover basic needs only, recipients were able to invest in business activities. As patients explained in their own words:

“Receiving this money meant a whole lot to me. From this money, I bought food for the home and I also paid my children's school fees.”

“Freedom from poverty is what receiving this money means to me. I was selling and later got sick. I had to spend all of my business money on my treatment. When GiveDirectly sent me the financial help, I started selling and today my saving from the business has increased”

We are experiencing a surge in cases across Liberia. Our mission has never been more critical than it is today. We need to help the Ministry operationalize emergency response plans while continuing to deliver and strengthen routine services. I came here in the midst of Ebola and made a long-term commitment to stay. I'm working alongside many of the same Ministry leaders to control the spread of COVID-19 and with many of the same dedicated partners and supporters. Your faith in us keeps us going when the going gets tough. On behalf of our “bosses,” our community and our government partners, I say *mesi anpil*.

In solidarity,
Dr. Maxo Luma