

THE GW CENTER OF EXCELLENCE IN MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

HIGHLIGHTS AND KEY INITIATIVES
2022-2023



The GW Center of Excellence in Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Education, Science, Practice, and Policy, began its work on June 1, 2020, during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Amita Vyas, Director of the MCH Program, is the Director of the Center and is assisted by Jerry Franz, a staff member of the Department of Prevention and Community Health, in the management and operation of Center activities. The MCH Center of Excellence, one of 13 nationwide, is now in Year 3 of its five-year grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

We are building the future by educating the next generation of public health scientists and professionals who will work to ensure that women are healthy before, during, and after pregnancy, and improve the physical, social, and mental health of women, children, and youth across the life course.

[Our Center's faculty](#) include members of the MCH and Health Policy and Management (HPM) Programs:

- MCH: Drs. Amita Vyas, Karen McDonnell, Nitasha Nagaraj, Melissa Napolitano, and Monica Ruiz
- HPM: Dr. Anne Markus, Zoe Beckerman, JD, MPH, and Elizabeth Borkowski, MPH. The involvement of HPM faculty distinguishes our Center from the other 12 HRSA Centers of Excellence, and our students benefit from close collaboration with nationally recognized experts in MCH-related policy.

[Our Center's staff](#) includes:

- Jerry Franz, Associate Director
- Maria Wallace, Graduate Student Assistant (matriculated fall 2021)
- Jennifer Farnsworth, Graduate Student Assistant (matriculated fall 2022)
- Sydney Durrah, Graduate Research Assistant (matriculated fall 2022)

[Our MCH Program](#) is grounded in a life course perspective as an organizing framework that acknowledges distinct periods in human development and presents both risks and opportunities for interventions. Faculty and students work together to learn and make the world a healthier place for women and families across their lifespans.

I. Our MCH Students

We currently have [82 students](#) in our Maternal and Child Health MPH program, a total that includes dual degree Physician Assistant/MPH students who selected the MCH program as their MPH concentration, dual degree Bachelor of Science/MPH students who selected MCH as their area of MPH concentration, and online students in our new Women, Youth, and Child MPH@GW concentration.

As of December 2022, our residential student body is made up by the following characteristics:

- 76% between the ages of 21-30 years old
- 72% full-time students
- 39% White
- 34% African American
- 12% two or more races
- 8% Hispanic/Latinx
- 1% Asian



The Center provided three scholarships to students for the first time in 2022. We hope to grow the number of Center of Excellence scholarship recipients in the coming years.

Dr. Karen McDonnell and Dr. Monica Ruiz also lead our program’s efforts in a complementary HRSA grant that funds the **Maternal and Child Health Leadership, Education, and Advancement in [Undergraduate Pathways \(LEAP\) Training Program](#)**. Drs. McDonnell and Ruiz are working with a diverse group of undergraduate students and introducing them to the field of maternal and child health. This program is designed to recruit, train, and retain students from historically underrepresented groups, including those who are racially and ethnically diverse, into maternal and child public health professions. This includes a **2022 cohort of 9 undergraduates, and a new 2023 cohort of 10 undergraduate students** interested in maternal and child health. Other staff for the LEAP program include Drs. Tamara Henry and Sara Wilensky.

The GW Center of Excellence in Maternal and Child Health is used to strengthen our MCH MPH program and bring new opportunities for academic training, research, practice, professional development, and student community.

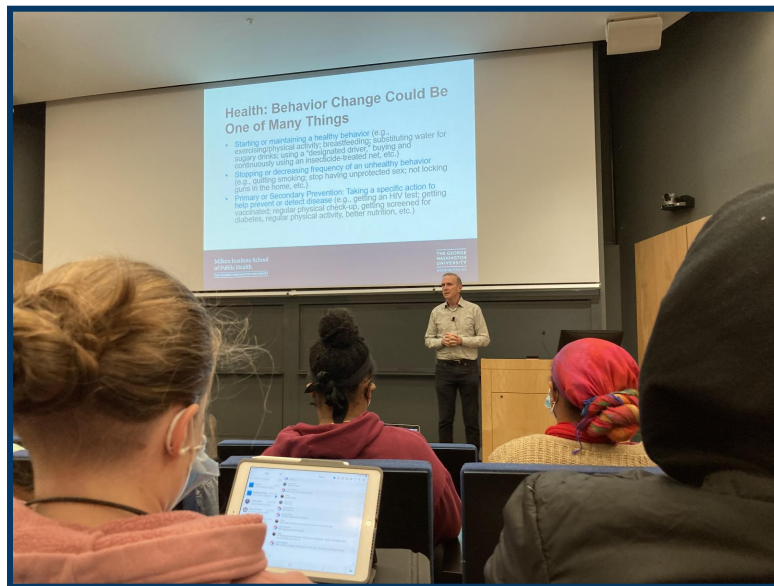
II. Academic Training

We’ve enriched our residential program courses with new faculty participation. For example:

- Elizabeth (“Liz”) Borkowski, Senior Research Scientist with the HPM Department, has worked each year one-on-one with MCH I students to improve their writing skills. In MCH I she trained students on “[Giving Peer Feedback](#).” With MCH II students, Liz has trained them in academic and advocacy writing, including [abstracts for journal articles](#), letters to the editor, and applications to their Culminating Experience (CE) research project final papers. These workshops are recorded and available via our Center website.
- On September 9, 2022, Liz conducted a [seminar via Zoom](#) entitled “*Writing Effective Public Comments: How to Bring Your Voice to the Federal Regulatory Process*.” Liz used a CMS proposed rule on nondiscrimination in health programs and activities as a

real-world example for our students to practice their policy-related writing. The session is recorded and made available through the Center.

- Center faculty Dr. Karen McDonnell offered students exposure to and education in one of her areas of research and expertise – ending female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), and invited the founder of the Global Women P.E.A.C.E. foundation to speak in class. Other guest speakers in the MCH I class included Dr. Jennifer Klein, MD MPH; Daryl Holder, MHSA, MS,PMP, FACHE, DrPH; and Diane Young, RN MPH.
- In the MCH II course, an IRB staff person came into the course to discuss ethics and human subjects research with MCH populations.



WYCH Online Concentration

It is without question that the public health challenges facing women, youth and children are more important than ever. Therefore, to deepen our commitment to MCH populations and to further expand our MCH training to public health professionals and students, we launched a new fully online concentration as part of the school's MPH@GW online degree program in April 2023. The [**Women, Youth and Child Health \(WYCH\) concentration**](#) is designed for professionals looking to explore the social, behavioral, and systems-related determinants that are unique to the health and well-being of women, children, and families around the world.

In addition, the Center of Excellence is currently working with the school's online program to develop an **"MCH MicroMasters program"** on the edX platform to inspire new learners to enter the MCH/public health profession, and to provide MCH workforce development training. We expect to launch this training program in late 2023.

III. Research



“How can we make research as interesting for our students as is it for us?” This is the question that MCH faculty continually ask themselves. And this was the motivation behind the creation of the [iMCH Learning Lab \(MCH Innovation Learning Lab\)](#). At our Center, we want students to have opportunities to participate in research projects that address current issues of importance in MCH and public health, while simultaneously providing support and resources for faculty to enhance and build their research portfolios.

Over the past 2 years, our faculty have led multiple iMCH Learning Lab projects with students (with small financial support from the Center) including:

- The Systematic Observation of Mask Adherence and Distancing (SOMAD) Study, led by Dr. Ruiz
- The Building Resilient Youth through Connection and Empowerment (BRYCE) project with our community partner Beacon House, also led by Dr. Ruiz
- Assessing Maternal Health in Washington D.C. to inform the development of the Developing Families Center (DFC) Maternal Health Fund, led by Dr. Vyas
- A study on female genital mutilation (FGM) and substance use, led by Dr. McDonnell

Read more about these past projects [here](#).

Recently, the iMCH Learning Lab added **three new projects** for Spring and Summer 2023:

- The Resilience for Advocates through Foundation Training (RAFT) project, led by Dr. McDonnell
- A University Student Mental Health study, led by Dr. Napolitano
- A South Asian American Maternal & Women’s Health study, led by Drs. Amita Vyas and Nitasha Nagaraj

Read more about current projects [here](#).

Publications and Presentations

In 2022 and so far in 2023, **five peer-reviewed publications** (most with MCH students as first authors) resulted from Center of Excellence Culminating Experience projects, including:

1. **Laura Tiffany, Caitlin P. Bailey, Amita Vyas, Melissa A. Napolitano** (2023). Do provider communication, race, or other demographic factors predict women's perceptions of ideal gestational weight gain? Under Review (Maternal and Child Health Journal).
2. **Monica Ruiz, Mercedes McMahon, Hannah Latif, Amita Vyas** (2023). Maintaining Adherence to COVID-19 Preventive Practices and Policies: A Systematic Observational Study of Masking and Distancing in the District of Columbia and Other US States [published online ahead of print, 2023 Mar 7]. JMIR Public Health Surveill. 2023;10.2196/40138. [doi:10.2196/40138](https://doi.org/10.2196/40138)
3. **Elizabeth Cassidy, Caitlin P. Bailey, Melissa A. Napolitano, Amita Vyas** (2023). Sleep duration and chronotype of pregnant women in the United States: an online cross-sectional survey study. Preventive Medicine Reports. 2023;31:102088. [doi:10.1016/j.pmedr.2022.102088](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2022.102088)
4. **Diletta Mittone, Caitlin P. Bailey, Ebony Eddy, Melissa A. Napolitano, Amita Vyas** (2022). Women's satisfaction with telehealth services during the COVID-19 pandemic: a cross-sectional survey study. JMIR Pediatrics and Parenting. 17/09/2022:41356. PMID: [36125862](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36125862/)
5. **Eric J. Puttock, Jose Marquez, Deborah R. Young, Abraelle M. Shirley, Bing Han, Thomas L. McKenzie, Nicole J. Smith, Kathleen Manuel, Deanna Hoelscher, Suzanne Spear, Monica Ruiz, Charlotte Smith, Kimberly Krytus, Iveris Martinez, Hosung So, Marian Levy, Vikki Nolan, Erika Bagley, Amber Mehmood, Joy Goens Thomas, Lily Apedaile, Shelby Ison, Daheia J. Barr-Anderson, John G. Heller, Deborah A. Cohen** (2022). Association of Masking Policies with Mask Adherence and Distancing during the SARS-COV-2 Pandemic. *Am J Infect Control*. 2022; Sep; 50(9):969-974. [doi: 10.1016/j.ajic.2022.04.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajic.2022.04.010). Epub 2022 May 8.

Center of Excellence faculty have also been actively involved in promoting Maternal and Child Health through various public presentations:

- In October 2022, Dr. Karen McDonnell, through the Center of Excellence, showcased outstanding examples of individuals working to end FGM and other types of violence against women and girls.
- Again in October, Dr. Amita Vyas spoke at a National Academy of Sciences forum about the MCH impact of the Dobbs decision. Dr. Vyas also spoke at a forum held by The Basics Learning Network about supporting parents' emotional wellbeing.



- In January 2023, Dr. Amita Vyas participated in the U.S. Department of State Shatter Summit, and also spoke in a webinar by the Atlantic Council on how to elevate global health diplomacy.
- In February 2023, Dr. Amita Vyas was invited to speak at a conference hosted by American University and GW Law that highlighted the health and equity challenges after the Dobbs decision.
- In March 2023, Dr. Karen McDonnell was a panelist for the GWSPH Black Public Student Health Network on addressing the need for policies and resources to decrease Black maternal mortality.

IV. Practice Fellowships

Dr. Nitasha Nagaraj leads our Center's efforts in maintaining and improving upon our relationships with [community-based organizations](#) and local public health agency offices for Practicum/APEX and other practice opportunities. Since the inception of our work, our Center has awarded [31 Fellowships](#) of \$1,200-\$2,000 each to MCH students, including **9 fellowship awardees** in Spring 2023 and **8 fellowship awardees** that will begin in Summer 2023. These students have learned from and with experienced public health professionals from these organizations, with which our Center has Memoranda of Understanding in place. DC Health and Maryland Department of Health are Title V agencies:

- [Beacon House](#)
- [DC Health](#)
- [Maryland Department of Health](#)
- [Mary's Center](#)
- [The Body Agency](#)
- [The Women's Health Collective](#)
- [Mamatoto Village](#)

HRSA Title V Fellowship Awardees

The National Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Workforce Development Center, an entity of HRSA, supports teams of MCH students to participate in internships in state and territorial Title V programs. Title V MCH Interns work on a project focused on improving the health of women, children, or families and learn about the MCH system of care in an assigned state or territory. Only students enrolled in a Center of Excellence in Maternal and Child Health or (LEAP) Training Programs are eligible to apply. Within this [highly competitive](#) field, **an outstanding 5 students (including 2 full time MPH students, 2 BS/MPH students, and one LEAP student) from our MCH program received this competitive fellowship for Summer 2023 at the following sites:**

- Jen Farnsworth - Vermont Department of Health
- Madi McKinna Hartsell - Wyoming Department of Health
- Catalina Desouza - Utah Department of Health

- Bukola Rinola - Minnesota Department of Health
- Orlando Gonzalez-Merino - Massachusetts Department of Health

V. Professional Development

In the three years of our Center activities, and through our GW Maternal and Child Health Student Network (GWMCHN), we have invested specifically in the [professional development](#) of our students. We have conducted career planning, job skills, salary negotiation, and job interview training for MCH students, in collaboration with our school's Career Services team and outside consults. We have also conducted virtual panel discussions of MCH/MPH Program graduates who spoke to our students about their job search process and the various professional positions they have held since graduating from our school.

VI. MCH Focused IPE Events

In years 2 & 3 of our grant, we partnered with faculty in the Health Policy and Management Department (HPM) and Dr. Andy Wiss, Assistant Dean for Academic Innovation & Professorial Lecturer, to develop and implement an [Interprofessional Education Experience \(IPE\)](#) for MCH, HPM, and Health Administration MPH students. We were the first public health faculty and staff team to develop an IPE from scratch, specifically for our students.

- The 2022 IPE focused on the [Black Maternal Health Momnibus Act of 2021](#) as a case study to introduce concepts, illustrate real life dilemmas, and discuss the implications of the choices embedded in the provisions of the Act. Students were assigned to a team (with a facilitator) who helped them narrow the analysis to a discrete set of provisions from the Act. The goal was for our students to better understand how these provisions relate to a range of federal agencies and the policy issues they are charged to act upon and implement. Student teams outlined an implementation plan for these agencies and an advocacy and policy strategy for advocates who would likely be engaged in the implementation process if the Act were to become law. 24 MCH students participated in this IPE session.



- The 2023 IPE was developed and led by Center Faculty Drs. Anne Markus and Zoe Beckerman, along with our Center’s graduate research assistant (GRA) Sydney Durrah, and a Health Policy student, Kathryn Fleisher. This four-hour hands-on session allowed students to learn how to apply advocacy skills to a current health policy and MCH-related issue in reproductive health care, focusing on the Dobbs decision and its aftermath. [The 2023 IPE took place on January 27, 2023](#), and focused on the Supreme Court’s 2022 decision to overturn Roe v. Wade. After completing necessary, required pre-work, students heard opening remarks from MCH Center Director Dr. Amita Vyas and [Wanda Nicholson](#), MD, MPH, MBA, Milken SPH Senior Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Professor of Prevention and Community Health. Students were then assigned to one of 7 states and researched the associated reproductive care landscape. Each state group then drafted 3-4 policy recommendations centered on health equity and justice and presented them to the group. This event was opened school-wide and included 14 students from the MCH program, 17 students from the HPM Department, 2 students from the Epidemiology Department, 1 student from Global Health, 1 PA student, 1 Public Health Communications & Marketing student, 4 students from the GW University Law School, and 3 students from the Health Services and Management Leadership program.

VII. Center of Excellence Events

On Friday, October 14, 2022, Dr. McDonnell, with colleagues from the [Global Woman P.E.A.C.E. Foundation](#), hosted held a special event at our school entitled **“Celebrate Our Successes: The 2022 Global Woman Awards.”** The Foundation has been awarding women and men for their work against FGM and other types of violence against women and girls since 2015.

Approximately 20 MCH students attended this event. Also, during this event, Dr. McDonnell unveiled the new **'Donald A Strong Man of the Year'** Award. [Donald Strong](#) was a beloved member of our school’s faculty and staff who passed away suddenly in November 2021. Mr. Strong had been essential in building relationships with community partner organizations for

the MCH program and other programs in the Department of Prevention and Community Health and he is sorely missed by our Center faculty, staff, and students.



Center faculty member Dr. Monica Ruiz led the development of a special event with our school’s Office of Applied Public Health and the Dean’s office that was held on December 14, 2022. The event was our school’s inaugural **“Annual Community Partner Recognition and Award Ceremony.”**

Dr. Ruiz persuaded the planning team to feature the Center of Excellence and its many community partners as the subjects for this inaugural event. As such, **GW Center Director Dr. Amita Vyas** delivered opening remarks for the event, during which she described our MCH Center and shared her thoughts about connectivity with community partners and the meaningful practice experiences for students that result from effective outreach and continuity. **GW Center Scholar Maria Wallace and MCH second year student Alyssa Baer** participated in a student panel during the event, in which she described her work with our Center and her individual Practicum experience with community partner **The Body Agency**. Awards were given to community partners, in recognition for not only what they do to improve public health, but also for the mentoring they provide to our students who do their Practicum experiences with these organizations. We are proud to say that of all community partners nominated for awards, the Grand Prize of recognition was awarded to long-time GW Center and MCH program partner, [Mary's Center](#).

On March 24, 2023, and under the leadership of **Dr. Monica Ruiz**, Center GSAs **Sydney Durrah and Maria Wallace** and other members of the GWMCH Network planned and organized a special viewing of Women in The Room's film *Birthing Justice: Every Woman Deserves a Beautiful Birth Story*. A panel was also held immediately following the screening, moderated by MCH second-year student **India Hinton**, and featuring distinguished panelists **Dr. Jasmine Bihm, Dr. Yolandra Hancock, and Dr. Ebony Marcelle**. The film focused on the experiences of Black women throughout the nation in the pregnancy and postpartum period, and highlighted the need for community engagement. The panelists (some of which were featured in the film) discussed the burden of maternal mortality on Black women and communities and how to advocate and address issues now. The event was opened to all of GWSPH and community members, and 74 people attended.



Other [events and MCH happenings](#) are highlighted on our website.

VIII. **GW MCH Student Network**

In Year 1 of our grant and working with Mr. Franz, MCH students worked together to develop a student group specific to MCH and the Center. MCH students conducted research into how clubs and organizations are formed at The George Washington University, and successfully applied for and were granted official campus status. Students named their new group the **GW Maternal and Child Health Student Network (GWMCHN)** and conducted elections to fill key positions of leadership. Students volunteer their time to serve on the GWMCHN, meeting weekly during the fall and spring residential semesters to plan, develop, and implement social, educational, and professional development events and activities.

We purposively recruited students from both first and second year to serve as members of the Executive Board (E-Board) to allow for continuity of operations:

- Maria Wallace (second year), President
- Rhea Kartha (first year), Vice President
- Jade Little (second year), Vice President of Campus Affairs and Professional Development
- Hannah Sprinkle (first year), Vice President of Communications
- India Hinton (second year), Vice President of Operations
- Belicia Badibanga (second year), Network Liaison to the MCH National Student Network

Students have established [an Instagram page](#) for GWMCHN communication and initiated and run a [LinkedIn group](#) for the Center and the network and alumni, with over 180 members. Participation in meetings and events of the Student Network ranges from 15 to 40 MCH students, representing approximately 30 to 80 percent of our MCH student population.

- Additionally, two of our MCH students participate in HRSA's National Student Network, where they get exposure to students at other of the 13 HRSA MCH Centers of Excellence and work on projects and activities.

Maria Wallace, current President of the GWMCHN, built out student interest in mentoring and created a network for first and second year MCH students to connect for advice regarding practicum sites, preferred classes, and the CE project. She is also developing a comprehensive list of MCH program alumni and is working with her network board members to develop ways to better engage alumni with current students.

Student Network Events

With support of the Center, and under the direction of current GWMCHN President Maria Wallace, the Student Network has developed and implemented the following activities:

- **Student Orientation Lunch, held on September 12, 2022**, during which Student Network E-Board members conducted an overview of the benefits provided by the Student Network and oriented a new cohort of MCH students to the MCH program. Center faculty and staff members gave a briefing on HRSA and the Center of Excellence grant and provided an advising orientation to help the new students navigate GW systems necessary for successful achievement of their MCH/MPH degree programs. 23 new students and 12 second-year students attended this event.
- **Practicum Lunch Event for First Year Students, held on November 14, 2022**, during which second year students and a few alumni provided descriptions of their Practicum experiences. Our departmental Practicum adviser, Katie Fernandez, provided a detailed orientation to the steps necessary to identify opportunities, develop objectives aligned with MCH core competencies, and successfully complete the Practicum experience. 17 first-year students attended this lunch event.
- **Resume and Cover Letter Workshop, conducted on December 5, 2022**, during which staff from our school's Career Services Office provided information on how to write resumes and cover letters that gain attention and appropriately summarize a student's experiences, and highlight what these students can bring to an employer.
- **Professional Headshot Event, held on January 31, 2023**, provided the opportunity for MCH students and faculty to update their professional headshot. A camera and professional light and backdrop were rented and our graduate student assistants took the photos in the Milken building. 15 students attended this event.
- **Salary Negotiation Workshop, held on February 27, 2023**, was led by Olivia Umoren, CEO of LIV Consulting and Career Services, a fellow GW MPH alumna. Students learned key tactics for ensuring compensation for well-earned skills. 14 students attended this event.
- **5K Cherry Blossom Run, on April 1, 2023**, was a chance for students and faculty to come together and form a team for the Credit Union 5K Cherry Blossom Run in Washington, D.C. The team wore matching shirts to highlight the Center of Excellence. 12 students attended this event.



The GWMCH Network is also planning to sponsor an end-of-year celebration to highlight graduates in May 2023.

IX. Evaluation

In the Center's first year, faculty and graduate research assistants developed a quantitative competency survey. This survey is a comprehensive assessment of their self-perceptions related to 60 CEPH/HRSA competencies for maternal and child graduates and practitioners.

The competencies assessed were related to knowledge of the MCH profession, social and behavioral skills, skills related to the MCH profession, ethics, communication, critical thinking, negotiation and conflict resolution, cultural competency, interdisciplinary/interprofessional team building, working with communities and systems, and policy.

- The data show movement in the right direction: For currently enrolled students, generally, students who have completed more semesters of the program have a higher average competency rating for each competency than students who have completed fewer semesters. (A detailed report of findings is available upon request.)

What We are Planning for Years 4 & 5

Our Center looks forward to continuing innovating in the future years ahead. With a dedicated backbone of talented faculty and a continued surge in interest for public health students in Maternal and Child Health, the Center's need for collaboration across the nation and in the Nation's Capital is critical, and absolutely possible. Ideas for the near future include:

- Creating a joint virtual civil discourse community with other MCH students at graduate schools across the county, spanning different political climates and attitudes.
- Creating an "MCH Leadership" fellowship and seminar series for MPH students.
- Holding a faculty/student workshop by Liz Borkowski on how to publish op-eds
- Establishing a journal club on relevant MCH topics in collaboration with Health Policy, Global Health, and Epidemiology programs within GWSPH.
- Developing a partnership with the Department of Epidemiology to apply for HRSA MCH-Epi doctoral training grant support.
- Organizing a visit to Capitol Hill and explaining how to advocate for MCH issues within the federal system.
- Partnering with community doula training programs to leverage MCH education with in-field practice and experience.
- Hosting a career panel with Johns Hopkins University to highlight the intersectionality of public health and MCH in various job settings.
- Collaborating with other 13 Centers of Excellence across the nation in symposia, conferences, virtual events, etc.

This is just the beginning for our Center, and we can't wait to make a difference in maternal and child health in the years to come.

To Sum It Up

As a new Center of Excellence, we have been thoughtful and deliberate in our approach as we launched new initiatives. We continuously monitor our Center's work to ensure we are meeting the needs of our students and supporting them in meaningful ways. It is without question that the MPH MCH program, the WYCH online concentration, and the MCH Student Network will continue to grow and thrive beyond the 5-year period of performance of the Center of Excellence. It is also without question that practice partnerships and research initiatives will continue to grow and be sustained with our world-class faculty and through other sources of research funding. The Center of Excellence has catalyzed research efforts and solidified partnerships. We look forward to continuing to elevate maternal and child health through our Center in coming years.

