On March 21, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Uganda, from a young adult who had been traveling back from Dubai. On March 22nd, UC Berkeley faculty Dr. Sarah Stanley reached out to UC Berkeley’s Center for Emerging and Neglected Diseases (CEND), with an urgent question: what can we do to help our Ugandan colleagues deal with Covid-19? Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, like Uganda, are extremely susceptible to becoming ravished by the pandemic due to communal living conditions, high population density, and limited hospital capacity and infrastructure - Uganda only has 55 functioning ICU beds, for a population of more than 40 million people.

After committing some of her own funds to help build Covid testing capacity in Uganda, she teamed up with Dr. Julia Schaletzky, the Executive Director of CEND, to secure additional funding through generous Alliance donors Steve Isaacs and Rich Robbins, as well as through the Bay Area Network “Collaborate for Africa”.

The CEND team collaborated with leaders at Makerere University to discuss the best way to support, and agreed that the most urgent needs were PPE and testing. At the time, Covid tests for the entire country were being processed at UVRI, which severely limited the capacity for diagnosis and response. Dr. Nasinghe worked with Ssewanyana to determine the best way to scale-up testing, which would be to expand testing to the molecular biology labs at Makerere University. At full capacity, the molecular labs at Makerere University are able to run 1500 tests per day, significantly increasing current in-country testing efforts.
Using CDC-developed laboratory guidance and the protocols developed at the IGI, the team identified the necessary laboratory supplies and reagents and were able to get all of the lab supplies ordered and shipped out to Uganda in just a few weeks. On April 30th, Dr. Nasinghe announced that Makerere University was approved by the Ministry of Health to run Covid-19 testing for patient care.

While the testing center was getting up and running, the team was collaborating on another issue: the PPE shortage. They identified two groups they were able to work with - a reusable face shield production company based out of Uganda and formed by a UC Berkeley graduate student, and a low-cost PPE company based out of South Africa. Working with the two groups, the team was able to secure PPE for over 200 frontline workers, who are now leading the expansive covid response in the country.

UCB Professor Dr. Art Reingold, a long-time supporter of the Alliance program in Uganda, states “It is encouraging to see how intercontinental collaboration between UCB and African scientists within the Alliance is leading to fast, nonbureaucratic help in times of crisis.”

If you would like to contribute to CEND’s current efforts, consider donating to the Pandemics and Urgent Health Crises fund, which funds projects to lay the groundwork for understanding and responding to pandemics such as COVID-19.