African NGO launches WhatsApp Platform to deliver COVID-19, HIV information across nine African nations in 31 languages

Cape Town, 6 August 2020. mothers2mothers (m2m), an African not-for-profit organisation, has today unveiled a new, interactive WhatsApp platform, which will deliver vital health information in 31 languages across nine countries. Dubbed the “Virtual Mentor Mother Platform” (VMMP), the new service will allow users to access and share vital information on COVID-19, HIV, Maternal Health and other critical issues, from a trusted source, in a relevant local language. The VMMP can also link users to nearby in-person services if required.

In the first phase of roll-out, now live, m2m has translated and adapted the World Health Organization’s (WHO) COVID-19 education and prevention information into almost 30 languages, including into many languages for the first time. This critical step means millions more Africans now have access to this information at a critical juncture in the pandemic’s progress across the continent. In Phase Two, due for roll out in October, content in wider health areas such as HIV prevention and treatment, maternal health, and early childhood development will be added to the chatbot, as well as content in at least four additional languages.

The timeliness of this large-scale launch is imperative:

- **It could help mitigate the direct impact of COVID-19.** WHO predicts that COVID-19 could directly lead to 190,000 deaths across the African continent.

- **People living with HIV will receive advice tailored to their needs at this time.** According to WHO and UNAIDS, COVID-19-related disruptions could cause up to 500,000 additional HIV/AIDS-related deaths, turning the clock back to levels not seen in over a decade. As many of m2m’s clients are living with HIV, this new service could prove significant in averting these outcomes.

- **It shines a light on the future of healthcare.** Beating COVID-19, and preparedness for future pandemics, depends on delivering free healthcare for all everywhere and fast—yet half of the world’s people cannot access essential healthcare even in normal times. Technical tools such as the VMMP will be an important part of the mix of services to reach universal health coverage by 2030.

It is against this backdrop that m2m accelerated the development of the VMMP, in partnership with technology providers Praekelt and Turn.io, and health communications agency Thrive. The VMMP will complement and deepen m2m’s existing in-person essential health education and service delivery. m2m employs nearly 1,700 women living with HIV as frontline health workers, called Mentor Mothers. These women work at health facilities and in local communities across the continent, and since 2001, have reached over 11 million women and children under two.
While Mentor Mothers already use smartphones to deliver services and track client data, the VMMP provides an additional resource to offer to their clients.

Frank Beadle de Palomo, m2m's President and CEO, explains:

"With COVID-19, demand for health information and services is vastly outstripping supply, while lockdowns and other restrictions have made it harder for our team to physically reach those they serve. We had to respond fast, and are proud that we continue to put “People First.” This new platform will play an important role in getting life-saving information to people when they want it, in a language they understand, and from a trusted source. Of course, we know technology is not a silver bullet. The Virtual Mentor Mother Platform is just part of m2m's service mix, which will continue to include in-person services, especially for those most at risk, and those not yet connected to the Internet."

Dr. Kathrin Schmitz, m2m's Director of Programmes and Technical Support, who conceptualised the VMMP, and has led its development, adds:

"Universal Health Coverage is a global ambition by 2030, and it is widely acknowledged that technology will be a critical element in the mix of channels required to turn this vision into a reality. With the launch of the Virtual Mentor Mother Platform, we are adding another channel to our peer-based service mix and we are excited to see our reach increased and intensified. As a tool that is easy to share, the potential ripple effect and information flow of lifesaving health education are hugely exciting, and a significant step towards ensuring health for all, everywhere."

The VMMP is being funded through m2m's $6M COVID-19 Emergency appeal. Launched in March, this appeal aims to support our COVID response across ten countries, ensuring we can protect and support our frontline staff and the over 1.2 million people we serve each year. Funds raised through the appeal are being invested in areas such as PPE, the development of the VMMP platform, and the purchase of smartphones and devices to allow frontline staff to continue to reach clients. To support the appeal, visit: https://m2m.org/covid-19/#support-our-appeal

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Additional collaterals are available for use here, including:
- Photos illustrating our work and the VMMP
- An infographic
- A video showcasing the VMMP at work
- A one pager about the VMMP
- A one pager about mothers2mothers
- A one pager about our response to COVID-19
About mothers2mothers

mothers2mothers (m2m) is an African NGO that unlocks the potential of women to create healthy families and eliminate paediatric AIDS. m2m trains, employs, and helps empower local women living with HIV as Mentor Mentors—community healthcare workers who provide services in understaffed health clinics and communities. Mentor Mothers educate and support women and their families to overcome barriers to medical care, and ensure they receive the medication and health services they need and stay in treatment. From an initial focus on preventing mother-to-child transmission of HIV, today m2m Mentor Mothers provide family-centred support from pregnancy and childhood to adolescence. Through an integrated Early Childhood Development programme, m2m looks beyond survival to give children the opportunity to thrive, and then provides them with necessary knowledge and skills in adolescence to protect the next generation from HIV infection.

Since m2m started in 2001, it has reached over 11M women and children under two, and created more than 11,000 jobs for women living with HIV. Today, m2m operates across ten sub-Saharan African countries. For more: www.m2m.org