

Public Health Commissioner Relies on 'Village' of Support

Chicago Department of Public Health leader values collaboration in reaching underserved communities **By Delia O'Hara**

From her role expanding mental health services to handling a major measles outbreak, Olusimbo "Simbo" Ige, MD, MPH, has already faced critical public health challenges in the city in her first year on the job as Commissioner of the Chicago Department of Public Health.



LUSIMBO IGE, MD, MPH, commissioner of the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH), began her career as a primary care physician in Oyo, Nigeria, but has moved steadily and intentionally toward public health leadership in the U.S. and now Chicago in particular.

"I started out seeing patients one-on-one, trying to help people feel better and heal. I decided to move up because I was seeing a lot of preventable things at my door," she says.

Mayor Brandon Johnson, who appointed Dr. Ige to her post last December, is committed to re-establishing mental health clinics across the city. That is an important goal for her as well, especially in underserved neighborhoods. With mental health providers in short supply, Dr. Ige hopes federally qualified health centers and telehealth services will help extend these services.

Her other public health priorities for Chicago include addressing chronic disease, violence, opioids and the upstream causes of poor health, like inadequate access to healthy food. "The Black community here is particularly disadvantaged, and disproportionately impacted by all these issues," she says.

Dr. Ige believes strongly in collaboration. Only a few months into her tenure here, measles broke out in a shelter where migrants were living, exposing hundreds of people to the virus. Tapping a number of local healthcare partners, CDPH facilitated not only thousands of vaccinations, but also one-on-one conversations with shelter residents about this highly infectious disease.

Within a week, the team had vaccinated 93% of that shelter's residents. The effort continued across 25 migrant shelters and into a focused second-dose project, and stopped the spread. The city's measles outbreak comprised 64 cases, 57 of them associated with the shelter where the first case occurred. The CDPH declared the outbreak officially over on May 30.

"Collaboration is just so essential for the work



we do in public health," she says. "Truly, it takes a village."

Dr. Ige most recently was managing director of programs for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, in Princeton, New Jersey. Before that, she was assistant commissioner for the Center for Health Equity and Community Wellness in the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in New York City where she oversaw the COVID-19 vaccination effort in public housing, which initially lagged the rest of the city. Within six months, 98% of NYC's public housing residents were vaccinated. As in Chicago, NYC's COVID-19 effort partnered with trusted community members to enhance outreach and education. NYC's initiative, the Public Health Corps, was founded in 2021 to promote health equity in communities hardest hit by COVID-19.

"We put the 'public' back in public health," deploying community health workers and collaborating with grassroots organizations, Dr. Ige says.

In Chicago, she says, "I want to make sure every population group feels supported, and can reach their health goals." What does she think of Chicago so far? "I love it!" she says. **G**

Career Highlights

DR. IGE COMPLETED her medical training, and obtained a master's degree in epidemiology and biostatistics, at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. She has a master's degree in public health from the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom. Her proudest accomplishments include spearheading an effort, as executive director of global health for United Methodist Global Ministries (UMGM), in Atlanta, Georgia, to reach one million children worldwide with lifesaving interventions; a "superhero award" garnered by another UMGM initiative to reduce malaria in sub-Saharan Africa; and a Champion of Public Health recognition from Public Health Solutions, a New York City nonprofit, for her efforts combating COVID-19.