

Frontline Health Workers:

Preventing Malnutrition

When Sangeeta Pardhe, a widow raising her three children in the Sharadnagar slum of Pune, India, wanted to give something back to her community, she decided to become a frontline health worker (FHW). Following an intensive health training course, Sangeeta began to visit households to assess health needs, provide basic treatment and refer serious cases to clinics. Sangeeta, who is supported by a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) program, weighs all young children each month to monitor growth and provides caregivers with nutrition and hygiene education. She also ensures that children are immunized and that childhood illnesses are properly managed. Sangeeta has been instrumental in reducing malnutrition among children in her community. In a short period of time, Sangeeta has worked directly with 200 children, and today, and not a single child under 3 years old in the slum is severely malnourished.



Frontline health workers play an important role in preventing malnutrition.

More than 170 million children worldwide will not reach their full potential because of malnutrition during their first year of life.¹ Proper nutrition is critical for the health and development of children, particularly during the first 1,000 days – the period between pregnancy and age 2.¹ When a child is malnourished, it can lead to stunted growth, impair mental development, affect future productivity and increase susceptibility to disease. Roughly 3.1 million children die each year as a result of malnutrition, accounting for 45% of deaths in children under age 5.² Malnutrition has a devastating impact on the health and cognitive development of children, but with the help of frontline health workers supported by robust health systems, it is fully preventable.

U.S. Leadership has Improved Outcomes

The U.S. government has been instrumental in fighting child malnutrition at both the programmatic and policy levels.³ Through Feed the Future (FTF) and the Global Health Initiative (GHI), the U.S. government set a goal of decreasing child malnutrition by 30% and has supported evidence-based country-led programs that address root causes of malnutrition.^{4,5} The U.S. has played a crucial role in elevating nutrition on the global agenda, especially through their 1,000 Days Call to Action on nutrition, which was launched with Ireland in 2010 to mobilize countries to accelerate action on nutrition and join the global movement, Scaling up Nutrition (SUN).¹ At the 2012 G-8 summit, the U.S. committed to bolstering the capacity of in-country partners to improve nutritional outcomes within their populations.⁴ In 2013, the U.S. reaffirmed its support of the 1,000 Days Call to action on nutrition and committed to:⁶

Frontline health workers (FHWs) provide services directly to communities where they are most needed, especially in remote and rural areas. Many are community health workers and midwives, though they can also include local pharmacists, nurses and doctors who serve in community clinics.

- Reduce stunted growth among 2 million children by 2017 in Feed the Future countries
- Develop a whole-of-government nutrition strategy and USAID-specific strategy on nutrition
- Track nutrition investments more clearly across all accounts

By supporting county-driven programs, the U.S. has played a pivotal role in local accomplishment of advancing improved nutrition, including significant reductions in deficiencies of vital micronutrients such as Vitamin A, iron and iodine in countries with high rates of malnutrition;⁸ improved community access to diverse foods and increased consumption of quality foods;³ and improved nutrition using community-based models that integrate nutrition, gender, agriculture and sanitation.³ By delivering a package of high-impact, nutrition-related interventions reinforced with behavior change communications activities, USAID-supported programs in areas with high child mortality and rates of under-nutrition have also have significantly increased initiation of exclusive breastfeeding and lowered anemia rates.⁷

1: Save the Children. (2012) Nutrition in the First 1,000 Days. http://www.womendeliver.org/assets/NutritionintheFirst1000Days_2012.pdf

2: World Food Programme. Accessed 3/24/2014. Hunger Statistics. <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats>

3: Feed the Future. (2011) Fact Sheet. <http://feedthefuture.gov/sites/default/files/resource/files/FeedtheFutureNutritionFactSheetSept2011.pdf>

4: Mucha, N., Tharaney, M. (2013) Strengthening Human Capacity to Scale Up Nutrition. Bread for the World Institute and Hellen Keller International.

<http://www.bread.org/event/gathering-2013/international-meeting/pdf/strengthening-human-capacity.pdf>

5: USAID. (2013) Improving Nutrition for Women and Young Children. <http://www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/global-health/nutrition>

6: Feed the Future. (2013) Progress Scorecard. http://feedthefuture.gov/sites/default/files/resource/files/feed_the_future_scorecard_2013.pdf

7: 1,000 Days. Accessed May 12, 2014. <http://www.thousanddays.org/success-story/capacity-building-for-improved-nutrition/>

Health Workers Expand Access to Nutrition Services

Frontline health workers (FHW) are crucial to the success of advancing proper nutrition during the first 1,000 days of a child's life and beyond. Rural or remote communities in developing countries often face geographic and economic barriers to accessing proper nutrition and medical care. Serving as counselors, educators and treatment providers, FHWs provide services to families in their homes and in local clinics. As FHWs generally come from the communities they serve, they are able to provide health services that are more culturally appropriate, and often more effective.¹

By screening children for malnutrition, treating diarrhea, promoting breastfeeding, distributing vitamins and other micronutrients, and counseling mothers about balanced diet, hygiene and sanitation, FHWs provide life-saving services in communities where access to nutrition and health care is limited.¹ In communities across the world, FHWs have contributed to major successes in fighting malnutrition and saving lives. Unfortunately, the world is short at least 7.2 million doctors, nurses and midwives, a deficiency that could have a devastating impact on curbing malnutrition and related health complications.⁸

The Crucial Role of Frontline Health Workers



Current estimated global shortage of doctors, nurses and midwives needed to deliver basic services

200 million
Number of children who currently suffer from chronic under-nutrition



3.5 million
Preventable maternal and child deaths occur annually from under-nutrition⁹



12 million
Children under 5 reached through U.S. government-supported nutrition programs in 2012⁶

The U.S. Can Accelerate Progress

In order to accelerate progress toward eliminating malnutrition, the U.S. government must increase its support for frontline health workers globally and maximize the impact of existing support for these crucial partners. To this end, the U.S. government should develop and implement a more coordinated and comprehensive strategy on human resources for health that outlines how it will contribute to strengthening the global health workforce to provide nutrition-related and other essential health services. This plan should include a blueprint for an evidence-based, country-owned, systematic approach to support recruiting, training, retaining, equipping and supervising frontline health workers across global health programs. In addition, support for frontline health workers should be integral in the whole-of-government and USAID-specific strategies on nutrition.

8: WHO. (2013) No Health Without A Workforce. <http://www.who.int/workforcealliance/knowledge/resources/hrhreport2013/en/>
9: U.S. Department of State. Accessed April 29, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/scp/fs/2010/147435.htm>

About Us

The Frontline Health Workers Coalition is an alliance of United States-based organizations working together to urge greater and more strategic U.S. investment in frontline health workers in developing countries as a cost-effective way to save lives and foster a healthier, safer and more prosperous world.

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