Only 20% of the world’s nations can respond adequately to a global health epidemic. Since diseases do not respect borders, even developed countries are only as safe as the most fragile states. The best way to reduce that fragility—and the epidemic threat—is to invest in frontline health workers (FHWs). FHWs are often the first point of contact communities have with the health system and are therefore key to effective country responses to national and global health threats. They can serve as the eyes and ears to alert the public, governments, providers, and donors about the incipient spread of a pathogen. They can help spark a mobilization effort that can stifle a disease’s proliferation.

Consider the devastating economic cost of a pandemic — up to $60 billion per year to contain, and up to $6 trillion in global economic loss. This amount dwarfs the $4.5 billion investment recommended by experts to address urgent weaknesses in health security, including the development of the frontline workforce—an investment in our security for only 65 cents per person per year. By 2030 the projected shortfall of health workers could reach 18 million, worsening already severe workforce shortages across the globe. For example, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea—the nations hardest hit by Ebola—had fewer than three doctors, nurses, and midwives per 10,000 people before the Ebola epidemic struck, which is far fewer than the 44 per 10,000 that the World Health Organization recommends as the minimum for delivery of basic health services. This workforce deficit will surge while epidemics like yellow fever, Zika, and pandemic influenza continue to damage and claim lives. For a relatively small increase in investment in frontline health workers, the United States could save millions of lives, create jobs, and keep America safe from disease outbreaks, which have been increasingly frequent.

**Frontline Health Workers**

**A Shield Against Epidemics**

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**U.S. Leadership**

- **During the Ebola outbreak in West Africa,** the State Department supported the training of 1,200 Liberian National Police to contain the spread of dangerous pathogens from the laboratory setting.
- **USAID** has worked with African and Asian universities to develop courses and train more than 3,500 health managers and workers in the One Health approach, which examines the links between human health, animal health, and environmental health.
- **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** supports 10 Global Disease Detection Centers covering over 55 countries. These centers have so far discovered 12 new pathogens. In the past two years alone, the CDC has tracked more than 280 outbreaks in over 150 countries in addition to Ebola.
- **Department of Defense (DoD)** surveillance systems detected the first case of H1N1 in the US, helping to initiate our public health response. DoD also detected the first cases of Zika in Southeast Asia, paving the way for detection and monitoring the virus’ spread in the Western hemisphere.

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**How frontline health workers save lives in epidemics:**

- **Communicate** signs of epidemics and emerging infectious diseases
- **Deliver** preventive and curative care according to national quality standards and protocols
- **Perform** laboratory analysis to diagnose and understand the magnitude of the emerging threat
- **Manage** supply chains and medical logistics systems to adequately equip health workers
- **Provide** data for ongoing disease surveillance and response
- **Coordinate** with veterinarians, as many epidemics and pandemics include zoonotic diseases
- **Act** as human resources managers and policymakers to provide essential supervision and decision-making
- **Support** a functional health system that can respond to all population health needs
The United States should release a multi-year, costed, cross-agency strategy or action plan for enhanced U.S. support to assist partner countries in strengthening their frontline health workforce throughout the labor cycle. This strategy should include concrete targets and clear accountability mechanisms for monitoring progress. The strategy should align with the global health Workforce 2030 strategy and the recommendations for multi-sectoral action by the High-Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth to invest in a sustainable health workforce. The effort should also include financing plans for health emergencies such as improving hazardous duty pay and family insurance options; providing personal protective equipment and adequate supplies and medicine; and recognizing health workers’ heroism during emergency responses to curb the stigma and violence regularly directed at them.

Citations

Cover photo by Charles Harris, IntraHealth International. Back photo by Christopher Wilson, IntraHealth International.

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.