

Fact Sheet

Elevating U.S. leadership for frontline health workers



Photo: courtesy of Abt Associates, Inc.

To increase accessibility to health workers to provide essential health services for mothers, newborns, and children in order to improve health outcomes, the U.S. government should:

- Work with partner countries to train, equip and support more frontline health workers
- Commit to improving the capacity and impact of existing frontline health workers
- Articulate its efforts to support frontline health workers in a government-wide, comprehensive health workforce strengthening strategy that includes specific targets for increasing equitable access to health workers in developing countries
- Ensure that strategies to expand and support existing frontline health workers are incorporated into maternal and child health programming

Frontline Health Workers Deliver for Women & Children

Ending preventable maternal and child deaths

The chances of a mother surviving labor and a child making it to their 5th birthday largely depends on where they are born: 99% of all maternal deaths take place in developing countries, and a child living in sub-Saharan Africa is 16.5 times more likely to die before age 5 than a child living in a developed country.^{1, 2}

The United States has played a vital role in helping to improve health outcomes for mothers and their children worldwide. In the 24 developing countries where the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been significantly involved, maternal mortality declined by 40%-65%. U.S. child survival programs also have made a significant contribution to the 70% reduction in child mortality in the last 50 years.³ Continuing on this momentum, the U.S. has joined 173 other countries in a commitment to end preventable child deaths.⁴ However, the 6.9 million children who die each year are among the toughest to reach with lifesaving services – innovative methods are needed to reach them.⁵

Frontline health workers 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 also can include local pharmacists, nurses, and doctors who serve in community clinics.

More than half of deaths under age 5 could be prevented by existing interventions for mothers and children – but in many cases, health workers are not available in developing countries to deliver these essential services. To improve maternal and child health, the U.S. has the opportunity to catalyze a global movement to increase the number of health workers on the frontlines in developing countries, as well as tackle the health systems constraints that hamper the capacity and impact of existing frontline health workers.

¹ WHO. 2012. Maternal mortality fact sheet No. 348. Geneva: WHO.

² WHO. 2012. Children: reducing mortality fact sheet No. 178. Geneva: WHO.

³ USAID. 2013. Every Child Deserves a 5th Birthday: Solutions. Accessed May 8, 2013, from <http://5thbday.usaid.gov/pages/ResponseSub/Solutions.aspx>

⁴ Committing to Child Survival: A promised renewed. 2013. Signatories. Accessed May 9, 2013, from http://apr.nationbuilder.com/government_signatories

⁵ UNICEF. 2012. Report 2012: Levels and Trends in Child Mortality. New York: UNICEF.

The U.S. government has been a leader in supporting health workers through its global health investments, including its work to meet the target in the law governing the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) of training 140,000 new health workers. However, these new health workers will not be sufficient to meet the severe shortages of health workers on the frontlines in the developing world. In addition, this target is specific to the PEPFAR program only, and concrete targets do not exist across U.S. global health programming, including for maternal and child health programs. Prioritizing interventions to train, equip, and support new and existing frontline health workers will be necessary to significantly reduce maternal deaths and realize the bold yet achievable goal of ending preventable child deaths.

Increasing the number of frontline health workers to expand access to maternal & child health services

Elevated U.S. leadership to support frontline health workers would extend the reach of the health system into the community and increase access to maternal and child health services throughout the continuum of care (Kerber et al 2007).⁶ The figure below displays examples of the needs of women and their children before, during and after childbirth, and the ways in which **frontline health workers (FLHWs)** can meet these needs.

Before pregnancy

- **The Issue:** Women need to be empowered within their communities, have access to reproductive health information, receive information on good nutrition and HIV voluntary counseling and testing, and have the ability to plan their pregnancies
- **FLHWs** provide discrete sexual and reproductive health education, distribute family planning services such as condoms and oral contraceptives, and assist with the management of sexually transmitted infections

Pregnancy

- **The Issue:** Women need to make healthy choices concerning their lifestyle and live in an environment that enables safe deliveries
- **FLHWs** encourage HIV testing, initiate prevention of maternal-to-child transmission of HIV services, promote use of insecticide-treated nets to prevent malaria, administer micronutrients, deliver prenatal care and screen for high-risk pregnancies

Birth

- **The Issue:** Women need to be in the presence of skilled birth attendants who can manage obstetric and neonatal complications and ensure timely referral to health facilities
- **FLHWs** provide support during labor, identify high-risk pregnancies in time to send women to referral facilities and can prevent postpartum hemorrhage

Postnatal

- **The Issue:** Many mothers experience infections or other complications postnatal, and more infants die in the first 28 days than they do from ages 1 to 4
- **FLHWs** provide postpartum care immediately, including breastfeeding support, and manage and refer any obstetric and newborn complications

Motherhood

- **The Issue:** Mothers need information and resources to provide their children with adequate care
- **FLHWs** provide newborn care education, promote breastfeeding and healthy behaviors, and conduct home visits

Infancy and childhood

- **The Issue:** Infants and children die from preventable health conditions
- **FLHWs** provide immunizations, provide oral rehydration salts to treat diarrheal disease, provide nutrition supplements, and ensure children use insecticide-treated nets

(Framework adapted from Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health 2011)⁷

⁶ UNICEF 2012. Report 2012: Levels and Trends in Child Mortality. New York: UNICEF.

⁷ Partnership for Maternal Newborn and Child Health. 2011. PMNCH fact sheet: RMNCH continuum of care. Accessed April 24, 2013, from http://www.who.int/pmnch/about/continuum_of_care/en/