

Report to Congress on Access to Maternal Care in Haiti

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) submits this report, pursuant to Section 7019(e) of Division K of P.L. 117-328, the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2023, which incorporates by reference the requirements of House Report 117-401, on access to certain health care in Haiti:

“The Committee is concerned about the availability of quality prenatal, neonatal, and maternal care in Haiti and the resulting impact of Haitians seeking such care in neighboring countries. Not later than 45 days after the enactment of this Act, the USAID Administrator shall submit to the Committees on Appropriations a report on proposed resources and programs to improve access to needed services for women, as well as assistance for impacted communities.”

CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

Access to voluntary family planning, reproductive health, prenatal, neonatal, and maternity care remains a pressing concern in Haiti, as the country continues to exhibit the highest rates of maternal and infant mortality in the Western Hemisphere amid the reemergence of cholera in 2022. USAID's close collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MOH) has helped ensure access to a package of essential primary health care services at approximately 170 health facilities across the country's 10 departments. In 2021, USAID-supported facilities demonstrated better health and wellness outcomes than those without USAID support. Building on long-standing health assistance, USAID ensures that approximately 40 percent of the population has access to basic health services which address the key drivers of mortality and morbidity.

Despite progress in recent years, access to quality healthcare for women and children in Haiti is hindered by limited access to facilities, particularly in rural areas, inadequate provision of healthcare services, and a perceived lack of demand for local healthcare services by Haitians due to ongoing insecurity and unrest and mistrust of the healthcare system. Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that in 2016, only 39 percent of births in Haiti take place in healthcare facilities which reflects issues of access, quality, and demand as well as low rates of postpartum newborn care. This has resulted in Haiti having the highest rate of maternal mortality in Latin America and the Caribbean and poor health outcomes for women and children, with 44 percent of children under 5 being stunted and. The COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of cholera in Haiti, with over 25,000 registered suspected cases as of January 2023, 20 percent of which are among children under five years of age, further exacerbate the dangers to women and children and overwhelm the fragile healthcare system.

The Government of Haiti (GOH) and the Ministry of Public Health and Population (MSPP) have taken steps to improve healthcare conditions through the establishment of a Package of Essential Services, a commitment to community health, and the implementation of a National

Plan for the Reduction of Maternal and Neonatal Mortality. However, structural instability and operational inefficiencies have limited progress, and the intervention of international donors has been necessary to prevent significant backsliding in Haiti's public health conditions.

The last two years have also seen an increase in Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic (DR) including to seek medical care. While the exact number of Haitians crossing the border to seek medical care is unknown, Dominican authorities have taken measures to limit the healthcare services that undocumented Haitians can access and to stem the tide of general migration into the DR, particularly in the wake of increased violence, instability, and the reemergence of cholera in Haiti.

The U.S. government, through USAID, is committed to improving access to quality healthcare for Haitians, meeting the immediate needs of a population in crisis, and working with the GOH to build long-term solutions to both chronic and emergent health challenges affecting the country. Through its 5-year, \$90 million project, Integrated Health Service Delivery (IHSD) USAID works to increase access to integrated health care with a strong emphasis on high-quality and patient-centered primary health services. In collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health and Population (MSPP), USAID resources target improved quality of and accessibility to the Package of Essential Services, focusing on voluntary family planning, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health as well as nutrition to ensure a continuum of care and efficient use of resources. USAID supports healthcare service delivery through a community-based, decentralized approach in all ten of Haiti's departments.

USAID, in coordination with other U.S. government efforts and other partners and stakeholders, also works at the national level to support the GOH to prioritize universal health coverage, strengthen the capacity of the health system to respond to emerging infectious diseases such as COVID-19, emergencies and disasters, and achieve epidemic control of HIV/AIDS through accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion.

LINKING SUPPLY AND DEMAND FOR HEALTH SERVICES IN HAITI

Historically, areas receiving USAID's integrated maternal and child health support have reported better health indicators, especially related to voluntary use of modern contraception and childhood immunization. Expanding the reach of these successes is a strategic priority for USAID. GOH entities may have limited incentive to improve or expand systems in the face of reduced demand, linked to perceived and real barriers to access, quality of care, and ongoing insecurity and unrest, and a continued lack of adequate service provision perpetuates widespread mistrust of local health care services. The result has been a health care system that is unable to meet the needs of the Haitian population, stagnant or declining health indicators, and continuing migration of Haitians, especially women in need of reproductive health care, to seek services in the Dominican Republic. The mistrust of health facilities by Haitians highlights the importance of creating a community-based mechanism that creates a feedback loop between clients/patients and healthcare providers to assist the Haitian healthcare system sustain and reinforce service quality and access.

USAID’S APPROACH CENTERS ON COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

Community health workers, known as *agents de santé communautaires polyvalents* (ASCP) in Haiti, are at the center of USAID’s approach to improve family planning, sexual and reproductive health, maternal/newborn/child health, and nutrition status. Selected by community members, ASCPs provide the crucial linkage between mothers and children to the health care system; provide basic primary health care services directly to clients in their communities and homes; and provide services to underserved and hard-to-reach populations. ASCPs also play a crucial role in guiding individuals to seek attention at healthcare facilities and ensuring that medical treatments and hygiene behaviors are followed at home. From a public health perspective, ASCPs are also ideally placed to be a key element of early warning systems for epidemic identification and response. USAID has a long history of working with ASCPs and supports nearly 1,000 of these professionals in Haiti. Directing USAID resources and activities to train, equip, and empower ASCPs to better serve as liaisons between the Haitian population and the healthcare system will help increase access to local healthcare services while promoting the need for improved quality of services and empowering communities to build resilient and sustainable community health systems. During the next year, USAID resources and activities will center on strengthening the roles of ASCPs to redefine the model of care implemented through the ASCP network, leveraging the bi-directional referral system between community-based and facility-based care to improve sustainable access to quality healthcare.

USAID DIRECTLY SUPPORTS WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Bolstering ASCP effectiveness complements and leverages other USAID initiatives to support women, families, and communities directly. Support for mother’s clubs, well-respected community-based groups led by ASCPs, helps mitigate low health literacy among women of reproductive age. Mothers who have delivered at health facilities are trained as companions to educate and support others through antenatal and postnatal care. Through support to these community-based networks, women in some of the most vulnerable communities in Haiti will gain access to health information that promotes improved maternal and child health outcomes, access to basic perinatal services, and support for continuity of care through local healthcare facilities.

In addition to supporting women throughout pregnancy, USAID interventions through ASCPs and mother’s clubs will also help educate women and communities on breastfeeding, infant and child feeding practices, protocols to identify and manage malnutrition, immunization, and malaria prevention. USAID works with health providers on respectful maternity care, to encourage more women to give birth in facilities that respect their rights and treat them with compassion and empathy. Also, given the renewed outbreak of cholera in Haiti, health interventions will include an important component aimed at improving safe water, sanitation, and hygiene practices.

To further support increased demand for healthcare services in Haiti, USAID interventions also engage local faith leaders and traditional healers to help provide consistent messaging to women in various contexts to seek healthcare services. Through these culturally-relevant channels, USAID interventions promote immunizations, encourage pregnant women to seek

antenatal care and deliver in healthcare facilities, and emphasize community adoption of best practices in healthcare.

USAID IMPROVES THE QUALITY AND RESILIENCE OF HEALTHCARE SERVICES

USAID also works to ensure that healthcare facilities are equipped and able to meet the needs of the Haitian population. This involves close collaboration with ASCPs to ensure that healthcare facilities are attuned to the needs of the local population and physically equipped to attend to emergent crises. Learning from the experiences of COVID and cholera, interventions will ensure sufficient availability of personal protective equipment and disinfectant material, as well as the consistent practice of effective waste management and implementation of USAID's Clean Clinic approach to infection prevention and control.

Support to healthcare facilities will also promote broad epidemic prevention through expanded vaccination efforts and specific campaigns to reduce vaccine hesitancy. Supported by USAID interventions, healthcare facilities continue to implement routine nutrition surveillance; help clients and ASCPs manage the prevention and treatment of malnutrition in line with Ministry of Public Health and Population protocols; and coordinate with ASCPs to ensure follow-up care. Technical assistance in healthcare facilities, as with ASCPs, also emphasize that patient-centric care includes positive, culturally sensitive, and level-appropriate client communication to reduce attrition and promote improved health outcomes for women and children.

ADDRESSING MATERNAL/CHILD CARE AND MEDICAL TOURISM

While the evidence that Haitians travel to the DR exclusively for healthcare services, as opposed to economic factors remains limited, there is no question that Dominican healthcare facilities, particularly in the rural border areas, are understaffed and under equipped. The perception that Haitian migrants detract from the availability of services intended for Dominicans adds to the risk and discrimination that Haitians suffer in the DR. Further, from a health perspective, Haitians seeking reproductive health and pregnancy services in the DR results in a lack of continuity of care as they are less likely to engage in follow-up, creating a potential risk to women and children. USAID continues to work along the border to ensure that migrant populations can access high quality health services. Strengthening health services for these vulnerable groups will reduce the need for Haitians to seek care in the DR.

USAID has successfully served women and families for nearly 50 years in Haiti through system strengthening efforts as well as through support for the delivery of an integrated package of patient-centered health care services. The deteriorating security context demands new approaches to reach underserved communities in gang-controlled areas, while heightening security costs faced by implementing partners, both local and international. To maintain and expand successful maternal and child health services will require a more focused approach that catalyzes site-specific successes to national-level impacts. This strategy reflects USAID's efforts to build upon decades of success and continue to shine a spotlight on the needs of women and children and their affected communities.