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Preventing Disease Outbreaks in Nepal

Several months following the April 2015 earthquake in Nepal, families were still living in temporary shelters and vulnerable to falling winter temperatures. The heightened risk of weather-related disease outbreaks challenged relief agencies already hampered by commodity availability issues, including limited fuel supplies. USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) and the UN World Health Organization (WHO) identified a need for stronger disease surveillance and health capacities in Nepal. With USAID/OFDA and other donor support, WHO launched the WHO Emergency District Support (WEDS) program to bolster health systems and effectively identify and address acute health needs and outbreaks in the 14 districts most affected by the earthquake.

In each district, WEDS officers provide technical assistance to the district health

office, helping local authorities investigate reports of disease outbreaks, routinely visit community health posts, analyze records to identify disease trends, address medical logistics issues, and improve service delivery in coordination with health-focused and other relevant stakeholders. For example, the WEDS officer in Dolakha District worked with livestock authorities and health officials in December 2016 to confirm the source of a small-scale rabies outbreak, provide vaccinations, replenish medical supplies, and promote awareness among at-risk families. Throughout 2016, WEDS-supported district health offices vastly improved local monitoring systems by enhancing reporting on acute malnutrition, maternal and infant health needs, respiratory illnesses, skin infections, and waterborne diseases. WEDS officers facilitated the investigation of and response to 33 disease outbreaks and conducted more than 820 monitoring visits to health sites in the most-vulnerable areas.

The WEDS program has also helped to develop and implement contingency planning and emergency response efforts, including restocking supplies at health centers ahead of the monsoon and winter seasons. Through the clinical and public health expertise of WEDS officers and with support from USAID/OFDA, WHO has proactively addressed health sector needs and bolstered local government capacities in Nepal, focusing on effective prevention and saving lives through nimble action.