

FRONTLINE HEALTH WORKERS

What You Should Know

The world faces a severe global health workforce shortage. There is an estimated shortage of 15 million health workers, particularly impacting the African region, which is constraining progress in maternal and child health and efforts to combat other diseases.^{1,2} According to surveys conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO), a lack of available health workers was a significant obstacle to maintaining services and last mile delivery of key COVID-19 tools.^{3,4}

Gender inequity in the health workforce makes the world less safe. Women make up 90% of health workers in patient-facing roles,⁵ but face a significant gender pay gap and hold just 25% of leadership roles.

In Africa, 86% of community health workers are volunteers with only some or no compensation.⁶ Despite their critical role in providing essential health services and responding to emergencies, poor working conditions and inadequate pay are leading many health workers to leave their professions.⁷

Supporting frontline health workers is key to achieving U.S. global health goals. The U.S. must work closely with partner countries to retain and support frontline health workers. However, to date, the U.S. has provided no funding to support them through a dedicated budget line.

Congressional Calls to Action

Fund and support the global health workforce.

Congress should provide funding to strengthen the global health workforce as the key to increasing access to high-quality primary care. Such funding should advance the professionalization of community health workers, and address violence against health workers and the barriers women health workers face, including in remuneration and leadership opportunities.⁸

Ensure U.S. global health security policies and programs include specific investments and targets for strengthening health worker emergency response capacities.

The U.S. should ensure that initiatives such as the Pandemic Fund at the World Bank support workforce capacities beyond disease detection and diagnosis. Global health security investments should support data-informed workforce planning capacity and community-based response, risk communication, and education.

Provide sufficient resources for global pandemic disease responses.

The U.S. must help the world respond to pandemic diseases, such as Ebola and COVID-19, to protect American and global health security. This funding should help ensure the continuation of essential health services during outbreaks and include provisions to protect and support frontline health workers, like access to appropriate personal protective equipment and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

Why is this investment important?

Pandemics can only be defeated with motivated and supported health workers. To reduce the world's vulnerability to outbreaks, policymakers must be able to rapidly deploy health workers to deliver vaccines, tests, treatments, and care in an emergency. Yet, many countries lack planning systems that provide rapid, accurate information on workers' location and capacities.⁹

Political will to address long-standing health workforce challenges is intensifying. The African Union has initiated a Health Workforce Task Team to develop a comprehensive framework to build a full African healthcare workforce, in pursuit of economic recovery and global health security.¹⁰ The U.S. should

take advantage of the clear global consensus on supporting the health workforce and use new investments to leverage complementary action by other donors, countries, and regions.

An underpaid and under-supported workforce weakens health systems. At least six million women health workers are unpaid or grossly underpaid, leading to higher attrition, low morale, inefficiencies, strikes, and reduced quality of care.¹¹ For example, skilled birth attendants and midwives often face low salaries and inconsistent payments, poor supervision and training, lack of clean water, and low morale.¹² Such factors lead to acute staff shortages, which weaken health systems by making services unreliable.



To reduce the world's vulnerability to outbreaks, policymakers must be able to rapidly deploy health workers to deliver vaccines, tests, treatments, and care in an emergency.

Resources

Top Policy Recommendations to Build the Health Workforce Back Better (Frontline Health Workers Coalition): https://www.frontlinehealthworkers.org/sites/fhw/files/top_policy_recs_to_build_the_health_workforce_back_better.pdf

Building, Managing & Optimizing the Health Workforce: HRH2030 Global Final Report (Human Resources for Health in 2030 - HRH2030). <https://hrh2030program.org/hrh2030-final-report/>

Strengthening Primary Health Care Through Community Health Workers: Closing The \$2 Billion Gap. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID): <https://www.usaid.gov/cii/strengthening-primary-health-care-through-community-health-workers-closing-2-billion-gap>

Global strategy on human resources for health: workforce 2030, Report by the Director-General (WHO): https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA75/A75_15-en.pdf

Alarming increase in industrial action by nurses is a symptom of global crisis in healthcare systems (International Council of Nurses - ICN): <https://www.icn.ch/news/alarming-increase-industrial-action-nurses-symptom-global-crisis-healthcare-systems>

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