

MCC and PEPFAR: Working in Partnership with Lesotho to Improve Healthcare

The U.S. Government's MCC Compact with Lesotho includes a Health Project that provides a clear example of the collaborative efforts led by the MCA program. This health project is part of a five-way partnership between MCC, PEPFAR (the President's Emergency Plan For Aids Relief), the Ministry of Health in Lesotho, the National AIDS Commission, and the MCA-Lesotho team with a goal of improving essential health services such as safe motherhood, HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and treatment for tuberculosis. Each of the five partners, in coordination with other donors, plays a pivotal role in improving healthcare in Lesotho, where 24 percent of the adult population is estimated to be HIV-positive.



A woman and children await treatment in a rural mountain clinic in Lesotho.

Under this Health Project, MCC has committed up to \$122 million to fund infrastructure renovations and strengthen health systems. This includes rehabilitation over a five-year period of up to 150 existing health centers and 14 district hospital out-patient departments. Half of these facilities are owned by private NGOs and the Lesotho Red Cross Society. The Government of Lesotho includes these NGO-owned and operated facilities within its web of national health services, and provides subsidies and in-kind drugs and pharmaceuticals to the NGOs in exchange for free or low-cost delivery of essential services to pregnant women, infants, and those at risk of HIV/AIDS. By providing adequate conditions for the provision of essential services in health centers, MCC funds will contribute to safer deliveries and prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV. This is important in light of the approximately 80% increase reported since 2001 in maternal mortality. Special attention is being paid to ensure that infrastructure renovations also strengthen tuberculosis infection control efforts – including air

exchange and separate waiting areas for coughing patients. Special efforts are needed to ensure both warmth and air flow in health centers where winter temperatures in the mountainous regions routinely reach below 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

MCC-supported health systems strengthening activities include support for the health decentralization process (begun in 1998), improvements to the utilization and technology base of the health management information system, and increased pre-service and in-service training of nurses and other health workers needed for scaling up services in response to the HIV crisis. Among the functions to be decentralized are health education and promotion. MCC is also collaborating with the U.S. Center for Disease Control's Global Aids Program to fund and provide technical support for a the new National Reference Laboratory and country-wide strategy to strengthen laboratory services and infection control. Evidence from other countries suggests that localization of these activities will increase utilization of health centers by expectant mothers and encourage proper antenatal care and testing to prevent mother-to-child HIV/AIDS transmission.

PEPFAR is enthusiastic about the renovations MCC is funding for health centers, as this dovetails with their focus on prevention, particularly prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV (PMTCT). In 2009, PEPFAR will scale up its PMTCT program to all 10 districts, and increase the number of health centers at which it works. As of 2007, more than 90% of Basotho women attended antenatal clinics during their pregnancy. An estimated 40 % of those were HIV positive, and 83% received a prophylactic treatment for PMTCT. However, only 50% of all Basotho women deliver in health facilities and for those women who do not deliver in facilities, there is no way to ensure that they are taking the HIV prophylaxis appropriately, and many children may be born with HIV. PEPFAR is hopeful that the renovated facilities will mean more women deliver at health centers, and more mothers and babies take HIV prophylaxis appropriately. As stated by Katie Crowley, PEPFAR's Coordinator based in Lesotho "the PEPFAR/MCC synergy will result in fewer babies being born with HIV, and more children of HIV-positive mothers living long and healthy lives."

Through coordination, the MCC Compact Health Program strengthens the backbone of Lesotho's health sector while other partners are contributing to the critical program content of delivering essential health services.