

**STATEMENT BY
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**SUBCOMMITTEE ON STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS,
AND RELATED PROGRAMS
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Madam Chairwoman,

I am Victoria Quinn Williams, Senior Vice President of Programs at Helen Keller International, and it is a pleasure to testify before the Committee on critical programs in global health and development. I urge the Committee to recommend in fiscal year 2016 at least \$3.0 million for blind children; at least \$100 million for Neglected Tropical Diseases; at least \$23 million for vitamin A; and \$200 million for nutrition in the U.S. Agency for International Development's Global Health and Development accounts. I also urge you to support \$850 million for Maternal and Child Health.

Headquartered in the United States, Helen Keller International (HKI) currently offers programs in 21 countries in Africa and Asia as well as the United States. Co-founded in 1915 by the deaf-blind crusader Helen Keller, HKI is a leading nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing blindness and reducing malnutrition worldwide. Our programs serve more than 285 million vulnerable people each year.

But the need is still great. Nearly 39 million people across the globe are blind, most of them living in the developing world. Two billion people are malnourished, leading to the deaths of 3.1 million young children each year. Most blindness and malnutrition is preventable or treatable and the solutions are known, available and inexpensive. What's needed now is the right level of support.

BLIND CHILDREN

According to the World Health Organization, every minute somewhere in the world a child goes blind. There are currently about 1.4 million children worldwide who are blind and much of that suffering could have been avoided. This year, as many as 500,000 children will lose their sight due to Vitamin A Deficiency, despite the fact that this condition can be treated for just over \$1 per year per child.

Blind children living in poverty in developing countries must depend on their families, many of whom can barely afford to feed themselves, and government health systems with limited capacity to meet their needs. They are often neglected and rarely receive opportunities to attend school or develop the skills needed to become productive members of society.

HKI uses cost-effective, proven strategies to prevent and treat vision loss in children. Our solutions include simple and inexpensive operations and vision correction programs for children in need, as well as building the capacity of local doctors and health systems to better serve their own communities in the long term.

This House Subcommittee has consistently supported a program for blind children in developing countries. In partnership with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the program has helped to save the sight of hundreds of thousands of children. I urge the Subcommittee to continue the Blind Children funding at a level of at least \$3.0 million for fiscal year 2016.

VITAMIN A DEFICIENCY

The World Health Organization estimates that 250 million pre-school children worldwide are vitamin A deficient. This silent syndrome compromises immune system function, leaving young children unable to fight common childhood infections such as measles or diarrhea.

Vitamin A is essential for growth, eye health, cognitive development and immune system function and is a key determinant of maternal and child survival.

Providing vitamin A to children between six months and five years of age reduces mortality by an average of 23% overall, and helps prevent disease, visual impairment and blindness. Vitamin A supplementation is considered one of the world's most cost-effective public health interventions, costing just over \$1 per child per year to prevent vitamin A-related blindness and improve a child's chance of survival.

Helen Keller International's multi-pronged approach to combat vitamin A deficiency in some of the world's most vulnerable communities has been applauded internationally, most recently with the BBVA Foundation's Frontiers of Knowledge Award, for their efficiency and success in reaching large numbers of children.

With the past support of USAID, HKI has become a recognized leader in distributing vitamin A capsules to children in countries across the world. I urge the Subcommittee to provide at least \$23 million for vitamin A for fiscal year 2016.

NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASES

Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) blind, disfigure and disable people in the world's poorest communities. According to the World Health Organization, NTDs infect one in six people, including half a billion children, and are responsible for more than 500,000 deaths each year.

They include Trachoma, the leading cause of preventable blindness which has left over 1.2 million people irreversibly blind; Onchocerciasis or River Blindness, for which 90 million people worldwide are at risk of infection ; Intestinal Worms, which infect two billion people worldwide; and other debilitating, painful, and sometimes deadly illnesses.

Right now, these “Diseases of Poverty” are keeping children from attending school and adults from being able to work, severely limiting economic productivity in the developing world, resulting in economic losses in the billions of dollars a year and trapping more than one billion people in a cycle of poverty and disease. Research has shown that eliminating NTDs can allow millions to climb out of poverty.

The USAID Neglected Tropical Diseases program has already made possible the treatment of more than 250 million people worldwide as part of large scale disease control and elimination strategies. With USAID support and the generous donations of pharmaceutical manufacturers including GlaxoSmithKline, Johnson & Johnson, Merck and Pfizer who have donated their products, HKI has been able to support mass drug administration throughout Africa and contribute toward the milestone 1 billionth NTD treatment being administered in 2014. Such partnerships have helped the US become the global leader in increasing access to medicines to treat the most common NTDs.

For several decades, Helen Keller International has been a recognized leader in addressing blinding trachoma and onchocerciasis. In Africa we support the provision of sight-saving surgeries for thousands of individuals suffering from trichiasis (the blinding phase of trachoma) and work with our local partners to consistently improve surgical quality and patient outcomes. We also implement school-based de-worming programs that have had an enormously positive impact on communities in Africa and Asia. In 2015, with support from USAID, Helen Keller International will lead a new five-year project in Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Ethiopia aimed at managing morbidity and preventing disability related to trachoma and lymphatic filariasis, also known as elephantiasis.

I urge the Subcommittee to continue the United States’ leadership in Neglected Tropical Diseases control during fiscal year 2016 by supporting continued funding of at least \$100 million.

NUTRITION

Malnutrition remains a major public health crisis globally, with two billion people worldwide suffering from this very preventable condition. It is not only a symptom of not having enough food, but not having enough of the *right* food.

Women and children in the developing world are especially at risk. A pregnant woman who is malnourished is more likely to give birth to a malnourished child. Her baby is also at higher risk of dying due to the dangerous effects of malnutrition. The mother, herself, is also at greater risk of death during childbirth, especially if she is anemic. It is estimated that 165 million children under the age of five suffer from stunting, 52 million from wasting and 273 million from anemia. Each year an estimated 3.1 million children die before celebrating their fifth birthday, with poor nutrition the underlying cause of about half of these deaths.

HKI supports the continuation and expansion of nutrition programs to support infants, young children and women of reproductive age and asks that the Subcommittee recommend

\$200 million under the Nutrition-specific account within global health programs for fiscal year 2016.

FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

Vitamin and mineral deficiencies cause premature death, disability, and reduced work capacity in many parts of the world. An estimated 38% of pregnant woman and just over 40% of pre-school children in the developing world are anemic. The consequences are dire: pregnancy complications, increased risk of maternal death, and delayed mental and physical development in children.

With Helen Keller International's support, the reach of national food fortification efforts has grown substantially in 19 countries across eastern, southern and west Africa and now covers about 285 million consumers with vitamin A fortified cooking oil and 293 million consumers with iron folate fortified wheat flour. Our large-scale food fortification initiatives provide technical assistance to national health ministries and local food companies to ensure these highly consumed products are enriched with essential nutrients such as vitamin A, iron and folic acid, while assuring the highest standards in food safety and quality.

Investments in food security and agriculture programs that explicitly focus on improving nutrition in vulnerable populations through access to nutritious foods can produce long term gains in child survival and health. These investments also provide income enhancement, poverty reduction and broad-based economic growth. I urge the Subcommittee to support a food security and agricultural strategy which includes improvements in nutrition as a central objective with measurable outcomes and puts the focus on supporting smallholder families, particularly women farmers and other vulnerable populations.

MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

Maternal and child malnutrition is an underlying cause in nearly half of child deaths, and continues to be a cause and consequence of diseases and disability in the children who survive. I urge the Subcommittee to recommend funding of at least \$850 million for Maternal and Child Health in fiscal year 2016.

CONCLUSION

For nearly a century, Helen Keller International has saved the sight and lives of millions. Today, we are as determined as ever to accomplish even more on behalf of children and adults in developing countries.

Helen Keller may have said it the best, "The welfare of each is bound up in the welfare of all." Thank you for your consideration.