

Strengthening local capacity to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in Panama

The United States Government (USG), through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), provided the Government of Panama with a donation of 50 ventilators for intensive care units to assist its fight against COVID-19. The donation delivered on the U.S. administration's pledge to provide these critically needed supplies and support Panama's ongoing efforts to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. **Between June 2020 and July 2021, EpiC provided technical assistance (TA) and capacity-strengthening support for critical case management to health providers and facilities.** EpiC collaborated closely with the Caja del Seguro Social (CSS)—the Social Security Department—to strengthen the capacity of the government to receive, install, and use the ventilators. EpiC then led an assessment of TA needs for the clinical management of COVID-19 and provided clinical TA.

Activities and Accomplishments

COORDINATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Virtual meetings were held periodically with CSS representatives and the U.S. Embassy, first to identify critical TA needs and later to monitor progress of the TA. The CSS provided input on the coordination of clinical trainings and areas of focus for technical webinars.

FACILITY-LEVEL ASSESSMENTS

Six hospitals (Raul Davila Mena, Amador Guerrero, Arnulfo Arias, Irma Lourdes Tzanetato, Rafael Hernandez, and Ciudad de la Salud) were evaluated using the facility level assessment (FLA) tool to determine the hospital's capacity to use the donated ventilators and to manage critical COVID-19 patients. A team of local medical experts conducted the FLA between December 2020 and February 2021 by visiting facilities and collecting data. Findings and recommendations were presented to the head of the CSS team and the U.S. Embassy in Panama. Overall, the FLA findings indicated that there was considerable capacity to provide a

EPIC'S KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Support for the installation of 50 mechanical ventilators at six hospitals
- Six facility-level assessments conducted to confirm hospital capacity and identify TA needs
- 600 clinicians trained in COVID-19 clinical case management through a series of eight clinical webinars
- 130 nurses and doctors completed the online course Fundamentals of Critical Care developed by the Society of Critical Care Medicine (SCCM)

high level of care for COVID-19 patients among the facilities assessed and that additional critical care training for health care providers would enhance this capacity. Based on the findings and input from the CSS, a technical assistance workplan was developed.

TRAINING ON COVID-19 CLINICAL MANAGEMENT

Because of COVID-19, most of the technical assistance provided to CSS was virtual. Eight clinical webinars were conducted with more than 600 participants from all regions of the country. Participants included health care providers from the facilities that received USG-donated ventilators, as well as health care providers in other facilities. These clinical webinars were led jointly by a U.S. clinical expert and Panamanian experts and covered the topics of triage, COVID-19 management, infection prevention control, management of patients requiring supplemental oxygen, use of ventilators, medications, and other critical care considerations.

Additionally, the Society of Critical Care Medicine (SCCM) online course “Fundamentals of Critical Care” was provided to 200 nurses and doctors. This course includes modules on assessment and triage, airway management, diagnosis and management of acute respiratory failure, mechanical ventilation, and monitoring oxygen levels, among others. The training was primarily delivered virtually through an online learning platform and included one in-person session on the use of ventilators. A total of 130 participants received the in-person training, which was led by two local doctors, Dr. Julio Sandoval and Dr. Eduardo Prado, in coordination with the SCCM, on July 30, 2021.



Photo credit: Dr. Julio Sandoval

An in-person training session on the use of ventilators.

Conclusions

The activities conducted by the EPIC project received a very positive response from the CSS partners. The SCCM training provided their staff with state-of-the-art knowledge and

competencies to manage ventilated patients and has been highlighted on social media.^{1,2,3} The EpiC project is working with CSS to develop a new workplan to continue strengthening the country's capacity to respond to upcoming COVID-19 waves. Specifically, EpiC will support efforts to strengthen the oxygen ecosystem in Panama through procurement of consumables and will provide clinical and nonclinical technical assistance related to oxygen use including monitoring and forecasting oxygen at the facility level. EpiC will also support health care workers by providing trainings on a variety of topics including COVID-19 case management and infection prevention and control.

Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC), a five-year global project funded by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is dedicated to achieving and maintaining HIV epidemic control. EpiC is led by FHI 360 with core partners Right to Care (RTC), Palladium, Population Services International (PSI), and Gobe Group. EpiC and its consortium members are implementing COVID-19 activities in more than 20 countries on three continents. In 13 of those countries, EpiC is providing technical assistance (TA) to governments and specific health facilities that received U.S. Government (USG)-donated ventilators and to health providers on COVID-19 clinical case management.

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¹ https://www.instagram.com/p/CTmn32VMVJg/?utm_medium=share_sheet

² <https://twitter.com/usembpan/status/1409564773918851073?s=24>

³ <https://pa.usembassy.gov/es/embajada-de-estados-unidos-facilito-curso-de-cuidados-intensivos-a-medicos-y-enfermeras-en-panama/>