

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
On
Human Rights in Haiti: Ideas for Next Steps
March 4, 2020 – 2:00p.m.
2255 Rayburn House Office Building
Statement of Loune G. Viaud
Executive Director
Zanmi Lasante

On behalf of Zanmi Lasante, I would like to thank the distinguished members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for arranging this hearing. I am honored to be here to address this commission and to provide an update on our progress since I last presented testimony, in December 2014.

Zanmi Lasante is Haitian Creole for Partners in Health (PIH), which began working in Haiti in 1986. Since then, PIH has expanded to nine additional countries around the world with a team of 18,000, 98% of which are nationals of the countries they work.

In January, we gathered to reflect on the ten years since the earthquake that devastated my home country. The people who have crossed our paths these past ten years, at our health facilities in Haiti, have continued to inspire us to strive for the best possible outcomes for all Haitians. We do this through our work in health care—which in Haiti and around the world includes medical education, cancer care, clean water, sanitation, research, maternal health and so much more. All 6,300 staff members for Zanmi Lasante in Haiti take our motto, ‘whatever it takes,’ very seriously.

Cholera and Access to Water and Sanitation

When I last presented testimony, cholera was ravaging Haiti. Over the last five years, Zanmi Lasante has kept all of its cholera treatments centers open, when almost all have closed in the country. Today, we continue to work with the Haitian Ministry of Health and Ministry of Public Works on the *Ten Year National Plan for the Elimination in Haiti*, now in its final, long-term stage. Together, we have seen gains in reducing the spread of cholera through constant surveillance and monitoring. We can share here with you there has not been a confirmed case of cholera in Haiti since February 2019. While this is a great accomplishment, close to 40% of communities in Haiti remain without access to water and over 80% do not have household sanitation. We lag behind significantly in these goals. We must all work together to ensure cholera does not return to Haiti by increasing access to safe water sources and increased household sanitation.

HIV/AIDS

In the 1990s, we began our battles against HIV/AIDs. At that time, HIV/AIDS prevalence hovered around 8 percent. We began using a directly observed treatment model for HIV/AIDs that was also successful in our TB care programs. Using this care model led to successful outcomes and showed the world that it was feasible to treat HIV/AIDS with anti-retroviral drugs in resource-poor settings.

Today, the HIV/AIDS prevalence in Haiti is 2 percent. Together with the support of PEPFAR, HIV/AIDS partners in Haiti, and the Global Fund for TB, Malaria and AIDS, we have reached unimaginable successes for what seemed impossible to many. For us, as believers in what is possible, we never doubted we would reach our goals. Today, ZL provides life-saving, life-long treatment to 14,209 active patients in HIV care within our network of 12 health facilities.

Medical Education

In January of this year, we had wonderful news about our flagship hospital in Haiti. The international arm of the U.S.-based Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education notified us that we had earned accreditation for University Hospital, as a teaching hospital, after a multi-year process of building our residency programs to meet international standards. Our 300-bed hospital in Mirebalais, located in rural central Haiti, joins internationally accredited facilities in just seven other countries. Ours is the first facility in the Western Hemisphere, and the first in a low-income country, to receive this level of distinction.

Since the start of our medical education programs, we have graduated 123 residents, 98 percent of whom have remained to work in Haiti, including 58 percent at facilities supported by ZL. We currently have 116 residents enrolled; ensuring the future of Haitian clinicians is secure.

Doctors in Haiti graduate from medical school and have limited opportunity to continue for specialty training, leaving the country desperate for well-trained specialists. Doctors leave the country for further training abroad and often never return, further widening the gap between the need and supply of doctors. The Medical Education Department at Zanmi Lasante has transformed medical education in Haiti. Our highly trained faculty deliver a curriculum that meets or exceeds international standards, and rigorously evaluates the resident's knowledge and skill acquisition.

Earning ACGME-I accreditation is a statement to our residents, faculty, Haiti, and the entire world, about the high quality of our programs and what is possible in Haiti. Improving access to quality medical care starts with a well-trained cadre of local physicians. ZL is dedicated to this cause, and grateful for the assistance of our international partners.

Maternal Health

Since 2015, 83,860 women have come to our facilities to give birth. Between 2015 and 2019, the number of facility-based deliveries at ZL-supported facilities in Haiti increased by nearly 33%, from 16,453 to 21,842. In a country with the highest maternal mortality rate in the Western Hemisphere, we must do everything we can to provide safe environments for women and their babies to not only survive, but also thrive.

Eighteen months ago, we began the Journey to Nine (J9) program, which provides vital pre- and post-natal care to women in rural Haiti. With over 800 women enrolled in the program, more than 500 babies have been born in the program so far. Women are averaging five prenatal visits, to ensure healthy pregnancies. Forty percent of women/newborns in the program received a home visit. Over 5,000 births occurred at HUM. About 95% of women enrolled in J9 Plus delivered in a hospital, compared to 60% in the general HUM maternity population, and 34.4% of women in Haiti nationally.

In addition, 68% of women in the program had a postpartum visit. Throughout this program, ZL was able to enroll approximately 30% of women on post-partum family planning, and over 50% of them are using

long-acting methods. The antenatal groups have a 90% attendance rate. Women are engaged in the program, supporting peers through their pregnancies, and encouraging other expectant women to enroll. Clinicians report that the groups are enabling early identification of maternal and infant issues, resulting in prompt referral and treatment of any complications and reducing the risk of maternal or infant injury or death.

Because of our dedication to saving mothers and babies, a woman named Manoucheca and her children are alive today. When she came to us in the fall of 2014, we quickly realized she was not only pregnant with triplets, but that two were conjoined. We moved Manoucheca and her family to Mirebalais, where she spent almost two months under constant medical care. Tamar was born first, and then the conjoined twins, Michelle and Marian. For the next 6 months, we cared for the twins and family while we organized an international team of experts. Skeptics of Zanmi Lasante said the babies would need to leave Haiti in order to survive.

On May 22, 2015, Michelle and Marian were successfully separated and today live happy and healthy lives with their sister and larger family. We continue to provide all of them care and support.

Our patients are highly vulnerable due to the extreme levels of poverty within which they live—but with Zanmi Lasante, they never have to worry about how they will pay for services. They do not have to worry that they will lose their land, animals or homes. Our services are free and, as such, we are at the mercy of the individuals, foundations and partners who support us.

Additional successes from our health care work in Haiti are many, and include the following.

Oncology

At University Hospital in Mirebalais, 652 patients with cancer received treatment at the oncology clinic at University Hospital in Mirebalais in 2019. That same year, 1,793 patients visited the oncology department. The clinic treats patients with breast cancer, gastrointestinal cancers, chronic myeloid leukemia (CML), and gynecological cancers, among others. Since 2015, the number of patients receiving cancer treatment at University Hospital has increased by more than 30%.

HPV vaccination and cervical cancer screening

Since 2015, over 25,000 girls have been vaccinated against HPV, ultimately reducing their chances of ever-developing cervical cancer and proving that with the support of NGOs like ZL, mass vaccination campaigns can happen in partnership with the Haitian Ministry of Health. Since 2015, over 30K women have been screened for cervical cancer at ZL supported facilities and in the community.

COVID-19 Preparedness

ZL is working with the Haitian Ministry of Health and has identified four ZL health facility sites in the event of confirmed Covid-19 cases in Haiti. HUM, St Marc, Hinche and Belladère. One site will act as a basic care level for isolation and the other three are preparing for intermediate level response. A ZL team has been working continuously over the last several weeks to visit all ZL supported sites in Haiti to ensure teams on the ground are ready for any cases of COVID-19. ZL is also using this opportunity to reinforce what we already have so it can be ready for whenever needed. Over the last few days, the team has started to prepare an isolation area. Training key leaders that will replicate the training to additional staff will take

place by mid- March. These activities are all in partnership with the Haitian Ministry of Health and at their direction.

Conclusion

None of our efforts would be possible if not for the support of many, including the US Agency for Overseas Development and The Centers for Disease Control.

While we do struggle to fuel generators, or transport our teams to health facilities during national moments of crisis, we have been able to continue to operate in even the worst times. This is because everyone, even the armed gang members wielding machetes, know that we are Haitian, we represent Haiti, and we will do whatever it takes to help anyone within the population. We do not judge, and we do not exclude. While it has taken 30 years to reach where we are today, the population trusts us even in the worst of times.

Whatever it takes is an effort made by all of us.

As we enter this new decade, I ask you, members of Congress, to continue to support programs that strengthen local groups and increase their capacity to have a positive impact. Please continue to strive for human rights-based approaches to reconstruction and development. For over 30 years in Haiti and everywhere that we work, our patients, communities and ministerial counterparts guide us on of how we grow as an organization and how we strive to promote our healthcare and programs.

As I asked you when I was here in 2014, please continue to fund programs that take a holistic approach to social and economic development. We are grateful for the long-term commitment of the US government to our health and education systems building.

A better Haiti begins with Haitians. A better Haiti is also possible because of the ongoing support of countries like the United States, our neighbor and ally. Together, we can build a Haiti where access to health care, education, international markets, and democratic elections are a given, and people will be happy to remain in their country. No one desires to leave his or her home. Together, let us continue to build a Haiti that is safe for all.

As I ask you this, I think of the children and young adults for which I am the legal guardian at the Zanmi Beni Children's Home. After the 2010 earthquake, 38 children with disabilities were abandoned at the General Hospital in Port-au-Prince, with no place to live after their home collapsed. On that fateful day of January 12, 2010, we made a lifelong commitment to these children. Zanmi Beni is home to 65 children today, and these children are blossoming into amazing young adults.

Tomorrow, they will be the next generation of doctors, teachers, political leaders, soccer stars, and proud Haitians. Together, we can make this a reality. Please join us on this journey to ensure it is a bright future for them, and for all Haitians.