

A conversation with Vitamin Angels, November 16, 2017

Participants

- Robert Parker – Chief Operating Officer, Vitamin Angels
- Kristen Hurley, PhD, MPH – Director of Programs, Vitamin Angels
- Amy Steets, MA – Senior Program Manager, Vitamin Angels
- Chelsea Tabart – Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Robert Parker, Dr. Kristen Hurley, and Ms. Amy Steets.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Vitamin Angels staff to learn about updates to Vitamin Angels' monitoring and evaluation processes. Conversation topics included how Vitamin Angels monitors its programs, how it determines where to work, and how it avoids providing redundant treatments.

Vitamin Angels' work

Vitamin Angels distributes vitamin A targeting the global coverage gap (i.e. the ~30% of children globally between 6-59 months of age who do not receive vitamin A from other sources). Approximately 80% of Vitamin Angels' interventions targeted at children provide vitamin A supplementation (VAS) (~35% of which provide vitamin A combined with deworming), while the other ~20% deliver only deworming. Deworming is delivered alone only in areas where VAS is delivered by other parties. Vitamin Angels also provides multiple micronutrient supplements to pregnant women. In all cases, Vitamin Angels seeks to deliver its services in a way that is complimentary to and coordinated with existing government health services. Vitamin Angels' eight priority countries account for approximately 50% of its distribution.

Eligibility criteria

Vitamin Angels primarily works in countries experiencing "severe" vitamin A deficiency, as defined using the World Health Organization's (WHO's) technical definition of vitamin A deficiency. Individuals are eligible to receive VAS from Vitamin Angels if they are children of the appropriate age (6-59 months old), and they do not have access to VAS from national health services or other sources. Vitamin Angels works to distribute albendazole (a deworming drug) to all eligible children who receive vitamin A.

Consultants

Vitamin Angels has senior consultants on the ground in its eight priority countries who serve as long-term country program advisors. These individuals are usually former high-level public health professionals from the country, and their work involves liaising between the Ministry of Health, UNICEF, and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They have a deep familiarity with the state of

nutrition in their countries, and have access to resources that would not otherwise be available to Vitamin Angels.

Monitoring and evaluation

Initial data collection

Vitamin Angels conducts initial needs assessments in all of the regions where it works. These assessments document the size of the coverage gap, the prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies and/or endemicity of soil-transmitted helminths (STH), and the child mortality rate. Vitamin Angels uses national data to determine prevalence and endemicity, and where possible it also uses sub-national data, such as local or district-level household surveys.

Documentation collected from field partners

Vitamin Angels collects documentation from its field partners to verify that the beneficiaries they are targeting are not receiving treatment from any other source. This documentation may include memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and letters of agreement (LOAs) with governments.

On-site monitoring and auditing

Vitamin Angels conducts independent on-site monitoring and auditing for a sample of its field partners to verify that they are executing their task as reported, and are doing so according to best practices.

On-site monitoring

On-site monitoring occurs at the distribution point, and includes observing things such as whether products are being delivered according to best practices. For example, Vitamin Angels observes whether children of the appropriate age are being given the product, and whether the appropriate dose is being given.

Vitamin Angels is testing a digital tool that uses a geographic information system (GIS) to confirm whether eligible beneficiaries are accurately dosed at the point of distribution.

Auditing of field partners

Auditing includes checking field partners' records to ensure that their inventories and beneficiary records match the annual reports that they send to Vitamin Angels.

Plans for a coverage survey

Vitamin Angels plans to commission a third party to conduct coverage surveys in representative areas across its priority countries. It is currently in the early stages of developing a plan for this work.

Avoiding double treatment

Since Vitamin Angels' remit is to work in areas that would not otherwise receive vitamin A or deworming, it is important for it to verify that the areas it targets are not being served by governments or other NGOs. It must also be careful to avoid overlap of services among its own field partners.

Avoiding overlap with governments

During its vetting process, Vitamin Angels asks its field partners for MOUs or LOAs that they have with the government, to ensure that the government is not providing services in the partners' distribution areas. In priority countries, Vitamin Angels relies on its country program advisors to rigorously vet field partners; in non-priority countries, it relies on its headquarters staff to rigorously vet field partners.

Avoiding overlap among field partners

Vitamin Angels and its priority country advisors map their distribution plan carefully to make sure there is no overlap between the distribution areas of its field partners. As potential areas of overlap are discovered, Vitamin Angels shares distribution plan data with all relevant field partners, in the form of an introduction between field partner organizations and a list of all of the districts and subdivisions of districts where each partner organization is operating. In this way, each individual field partner has the information necessary to avoid duplicating services.

Avoiding overlap with other NGOs

Through rigorous vetting, Vitamin Angels provides vitamin A to local NGOs that work in areas determined to have no access to vitamin A from any other source (including the government). In Vitamin Angels' experience, it is very rare that any other NGOs are distributing vitamin A in its hard-to-reach distribution areas. Vitamin Angels is the only donor that provides vitamin A to local NGOs. It is very difficult for local NGOs to source these products within and outside of the government system.

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