

A conversation with Vitamin Angels, January 8, 2019

Participants

- Dr. Kristen Hurley – Director of Programs, Vitamin Angels
- Amy Steets – Associate Director of Program Operations, Vitamin Angels
- Jamie Frederick – Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, Vitamin Angels
- Natalie Crispin – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell
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Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Vitamin Angels.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Dr. Hurley, Ms. Steets, and Ms. Frederick of Vitamin Angels to learn about Vitamin Angels' recent progress. Conversation topics included Vitamin Angels' partnership model, the increasing global coverage gap for vitamin A supplementation, and Vitamin Angels' 2018 monitoring and evaluation activities.

Overview of Vitamin Angels

Vitamin Angels is a nonprofit based in the United States. Its mission is to help at-risk women and children gain access to essential micronutrients, thereby breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition. In 2018 Vitamin Angels reached approximately 70 million children in 70 countries, through a network of over 1500 field partners. See our notes from previous conversations with Vitamin Angels for more detail.¹

Model

Priority interventions

Vitamin Angels provides evidence-based nutrition interventions during critical periods of children's growth and development, and specifically targets pregnant women, new mothers, and children under the age of five. Its three primary interventions are:

- Vitamin A supplementation (VAS) for children under five
- Deworming for children under five
- Multiple micronutrient supplements for pregnant women

Target populations

Vitamin Angels targets hard-to-reach populations – those that are not already receiving evidence-based nutrition interventions from national healthcare services or other organizations. Though coverage varies by country, on average governments

¹ [https://files.givewell.org/files/conversations/Vitamin_Angels_11-16-17_\(public\).pdf](https://files.givewell.org/files/conversations/Vitamin_Angels_11-16-17_(public).pdf) and [https://files.givewell.org/files/conversations/Vitamin_Angels_05-17-18_\(public\).pdf](https://files.givewell.org/files/conversations/Vitamin_Angels_05-17-18_(public).pdf)

are able to reach ~70% of their population with health services; the remaining ~30% is Vitamin Angels' target population.

This 30% of the population may not be reached for a variety of reasons including living in geographically isolated areas, having access to healthcare services with limited or no supplies, or being part of a migrant population.

Approach

Vitamin Angels' approach is to leverage resources (products and technical assistance) to support evidence-based nutrition interventions. Vitamin Angels identifies and vets qualified field partners that have the capacity to reach hard-to-reach populations not already being served by the national government. Field partners design, staff, finance, and execute distribution of resources to women and children.

Partnerships

Vitamin Angels partners primarily with local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are well-positioned to serve hard-to-reach populations. In some cases, Vitamin Angels may also partner directly with governments.

Structure of the partnerships

Vitamin Angels identifies field partners that have the capacity to provide health services to hard-to-reach populations, and can integrate Vitamin Angels' evidence-based nutrition interventions into the health services they already provide. After partners have been identified and vetted, those partners design, staff, finance, and deliver the interventions to hard-to-reach mothers and children. Vitamin Angels does not provide funding for the distribution of the interventions it supports.

Sourcing of vitamin A capsules

Vitamin Angels purchases vitamin A capsules manufactured to high standards and provides these to qualified field partners. Vitamin Angels is the largest distributor of vitamin A capsules to non-governmental organizations.

Country advisors

In nine priority countries that have both a high concentration of potential field partners and a high need (such as gaps in health services or high rates of undernutrition), Vitamin Angels contracts local advisors to help with the vetting and management of field partners. These advisors also facilitate coordination between Vitamin Angels and its partners, and the national or local government. In each of Vitamin Angels' priority countries it has between one and six country advisors.

Growing coverage gap

In May 2018, UNICEF released a report alerting the public health and nutrition community that VAS funding and coverage is dropping, and more than 140 million

children are not being served. Since Vitamin Angels' work focuses on filling coverage gaps, its efforts are becoming increasingly important.

Update to Vitamin Angels' 2018 monitoring and evaluation activities²

Vetting and reporting

Vitamin Angels vets its field partners to ensure they are qualified and have the capacity to serve hard-to-reach populations with evidence-based nutrition interventions. Vitamin Angels works with a wide variety of field partners. The vetting process is designed to make clear what each field partner does, how it does it, and who the beneficiaries it serves are.

After a partner is successfully vetted and approved, Vitamin Angels executes on different monitoring and evaluation strategies to ensure that eligible, unserved beneficiaries are being reached. Vitamin Angels' monitoring and evaluation strategies include vetting and bi-annual reporting, on-site monitoring, and coverage surveys.

The purpose of vetting field partners is to ensure their ability to distribute interventions to hard-to-reach populations and coordinate with other NGOs and national and/or local governments. In 2018 Vitamin Angels started collecting additional documentation from field partners to validate that they are coordinating their services with the national healthcare system. Examples of this documentation include memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and letters from governments. The purpose of this is to ensure that there is no duplication of services. To date, this type of documentation has been provided for approximately 60% of Vitamin Angels' beneficiaries reached. In 2019 Vitamin Angels aims to collect documentation for 80% of beneficiaries reached.

On-site monitoring

Each year Vitamin Angels visits a random sample of its field partners to validate that each partner's inventory and beneficiary records reconcile with its annual report, and that it is delivering services according to best practices.

In 2018 Vitamin Angels completed 128 monitoring visits in 19 countries with 28 qualified monitors, using smartphones for data collection. These visits covered 15% of Vitamin Angels' partners. In 2019, Vitamin Angels plans to sample 20% of its partners.

² For previous monitoring and evaluation updates, see our notes from conversations with Vitamin Angels in November 2017 and May 2018: [https://files.givewell.org/files/conversations/Vitamin_Angels_11-16-17_\(public\).pdf](https://files.givewell.org/files/conversations/Vitamin_Angels_11-16-17_(public).pdf) and [https://files.givewell.org/files/conversations/Vitamin_Angels_05-17-18_\(public\).pdf](https://files.givewell.org/files/conversations/Vitamin_Angels_05-17-18_(public).pdf).

Lessons learned

- During this process, Vitamin Angels found that some partners do not keep complete records. Based on this information, Vitamin Angels now provides more technical assistance in this area.
- On another site visit, Vitamin Angels discovered that one of its partners did not have enough resources to distribute the vitamin A capsules. Based on this, Vitamin Angels decided to discontinue the relationship.
- Vitamin Angels discovered that two other partners were providing services in the same area. As a result, Vitamin Angels facilitated better coordination and communication between the two field partners.

Coverage surveys

Vitamin Angels has recently begun to conduct coverage surveys to validate that it is reaching hard-to-reach populations and is not duplicating services. With input from experts from Johns Hopkins University, international NGOs, and IDinsight, Vitamin Angels developed a plan for conducting coverage surveys that is appropriate for its model.

Determining the source of coverage

In India, whether a dose of vitamin A was provided by Vitamin Angels or by the national health services was evaluated by asking caregivers whether their child received vitamin A in capsule or syrup form.

In other countries, such as Nigeria, where the products provided by Vitamin Angels and the government look exactly the same, the question is more difficult. Vitamin Angels is in the process of developing procedures and questions that can be implemented to determine if the vitamin A capsule a child received was provided by Vitamin Angels or by the government.

Coverage surveys in Nagaland, India

Vitamin Angels has completed its first coverage survey, which measured VAS coverage in Nagaland, India. It partnered with Evidence Action India to carry out this survey with continuous technical input from IDinsight.

A 2005 coverage survey by the Nagaland state government found that 7% of children received vitamin A that year. Based on these data, Vitamin Angels initiated a VAS program in Nagaland in 2011, aiming to reach ~30% of children in the state. In 2015 the state government completed another coverage survey, which showed that 27% of children received vitamin A that year. The increase was attributed to Vitamin Angels' support.

In 2015, Vitamin Angels increased the amount of product provided to Nagaland to further improve coverage. Preliminary data from Vitamin Angels' 2018 survey suggest that the coverage increased.

Plans for 2019

Vitamin Angels is planning to conduct more coverage surveys in 2019 targeted at its largest program areas.

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>