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**Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee**  
**Subcommittee On Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security,**  
**Democracy, Human Rights, And Global Women's Issues**  
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Chairman Kaine, Ranking Member Rubio, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify today about the Biden-Harris Administration's response to COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean. I am grateful for the Committee's support for the United States Agency for International Development's work, particularly as we work as part of a larger U.S. government effort to address the impacts of the pandemic in the region.

**Context**

The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have been hit hard by COVID-19. In the last eighteen months, the virus has swept through the region, infecting more than 46 million people and killing more than 1.5 million; although it is home to only eight percent of the world's population, the region has seen 20 percent of all cases, and just over 30 percent of all global deaths. We mourn with the families of those impacted both at home and abroad.

As is the case around the world, the pandemic has reverberated through all sectors of society and jeopardized important development gains made in recent decades. As countries went into a series of lockdowns and quarantines, many people worked significantly fewer hours or lost their sources of income entirely; in fact, the International Labor Organization estimates that the region lost 31 million jobs in 2020 due to the pandemic, and its economies contracted by seven percent in 2020, according to International Monetary Fund estimates. Gender-based violence, an issue that I know is of particular concern to this subcommittee, also has increased during the pandemic; in Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia, for example, calls to domestic violence hotlines rose by 40, 80, and more than 100 percent, respectively, in the first months after mandatory stay-at-home orders were issued. Children were unable to go to school, and many who do not have access to technology or reliable internet to continue their education at home are in danger of being left behind. Authoritarian leaders used COVID-19 as an excuse to consolidate power, take further anti-democratic actions, and imperil human rights and fundamental freedoms.

That said, the region is in a much different position than it was even six months ago, and United States assistance has been pivotal to the progress that has been made. As we address the pandemic at home, the American people have demonstrated incredible generosity and solidarity with our neighbors around the world, providing more than \$9 billion for USAID's global COVID-19 response, including nearly \$500 million in Latin America and the Caribbean since March 2020, in addition to support from other U.S. departments and agencies. Infection and death rates due to COVID-19 have decreased by 84 percent over the past five months. The region's economy is also improving, with the International Monetary Fund projecting an economic rebound of 6.3 percent in 2021, second only to emerging and developing economies in Asia; the United States' support to the region has undoubtedly played a part in this encouraging progress.

## **USAID Response**

USAID is supporting COVID-19 efforts in 29 countries in the region. We are working in close partnership with local governments, international organizations, the private sector both in the region and the United States, faith-based organizations, and other non-governmental organizations to deliver urgent assistance to those most in need. Since the beginning of the pandemic, USAID personnel in Washington and our field missions have moved quickly to mobilize new health assistance, respond to emerging food and protection needs, adapt current programming, and plan for the long-term impacts that we know will plague the region for years to come. I commend our staff, partners, and all those on the front lines, who are working relentlessly to help those most in need.

USAID mobilized from the earliest days of the pandemic to respond to the urgent health situation in Latin America and the Caribbean. As COVID-19 emerged, we began the work we continue to this day: partnering with countries to treat those affected and stop the virus from spreading. We are working with health ministries to minimize the risk of transmission and prevent and control infections in healthcare facilities, including through the donation of personal protective equipment for health care workers. We train and equip rapid-response teams to better track and record cases. We support the rehabilitation and repair of water systems to ensure that there is access to clean water at health facilities, promote healthy hand-washing behaviors, and partner with utilities and other service providers to maintain water and sanitation services so that businesses and markets can operate safely. We help countries to provide the public with reliable, verifiable information that keeps citizens informed about how best to protect themselves and each other. Along with training health professionals to ensure they are able and equipped to manage COVID-19 cases, we have also provided both oxygen and ventilator support throughout the region to treat patients in the most dire need.

For example, as part of our region-wide communications efforts, USAID funded a COVID-19 campaign in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic to promote public awareness on preventive practices and counter misinformation, and targeted areas of the border with Haiti to raise awareness of the dangers of the disease. As with other countries in the region and the world, in Honduras, USAID provided training to help more than 2,600 health workers care for COVID-19 patients, including patients with severe COVID-19, improving the quality of care offered in hospitals, triage centers, and other health centers across the country. In Haiti, USAID donated oxygen supplies, including 50 oxygen concentrators in June and 250 oxygen-filled cylinders this month, to help ensure the uninterrupted availability of oxygen for critical COVID-19 patients receiving treatment.

Of course, the availability and wider distribution of vaccines has been key to the region's significant strides this year. In the last five months, the United States – bilaterally or in partnership with COVAX – has provided more than 50 million vaccines to countries throughout the region, enabling millions of people to be fully vaccinated against the deadly virus. These vaccines are being provided safely, equitably, and with no political strings attached.

USAID is providing crucial assistance that has enabled countries to receive and distribute these life-saving vaccines. Our efforts to get shots in arms include support for cold chain management

to ensure that vaccines remain viable and effective, training of vaccinators and establishment of vaccination sites, support for communications campaigns to provide accurate information and help overcome vaccine hesitancy, and work with ministries of health to better track vaccination rates.

For example, in Guatemala, we have supported the establishment and quality improvement of more than 690 vaccination sites across the country, including walk-up, drive-up, and hybrid walk-up/drive-up sites in public and private sector venues. In Peru, USAID is supporting the implementation of the Government of Peru's national COVID-19 vaccination plan, including by training more than 1,750 (56 percent of whom are women) health workers in planning, conservation of vaccines in the cold chain, vaccination process, and handling and application of vaccines. And in Barbados, USAID supported public service announcements that reached more than 50,000 parents with messaging on COVID-19 vaccination for children aged 12-18.

Just last month, I saw this progress firsthand when I visited Medellin, Colombia. The department of Antioquia, of which Medellin is the capital, was severely impacted by COVID-19, seeing daily cases in excess of 4,000 and a 98 percent ICU occupancy rate in June 2021. Thanks to the Government of Colombia's concerted response, which included distribution of vaccines donated by the United States and purchased by Colombia through COVAX, as well as USAID support for vaccine distribution planning, communications, and service delivery, Antioquia was able to significantly reduce infection prevalence and death rates, decreasing to 301 recorded infections a day in mid-October 2021. This is the kind of progress that USAID seeks to replicate throughout the region.

As a result of these concerted efforts by the United States and the people of the region, over the past 5 months, the region's death and infection rates have both dropped by 84 percent. USAID's widespread programs in support of our partner nations' COVID-19 response have been key to making that good news possible, and we remain committed to supporting our neighbors in their ongoing efforts.

As we have addressed the critical health situation, we have been keenly aware of the secondary impacts of the pandemic, including job losses and kids out of the classroom, growing food insecurity, increases in gender-based violence, and contraction of civil liberties and rights. When the pandemic tore through the region, and even as our own staff was affected by infection and lockdowns, our field missions quickly pivoted programs to adapt, addressing both these emerging issues while also ensuring that the important work of development can advance. USAID continues to address long-term challenges in the region through programs that foster inclusive economic growth, address climate change, improve citizen security, promote respect for human rights (including freedom of expression, including for members of the press), fight corruption and promote transparency, elevate the voices of civil society and other community leaders, and enable diversity and participation by historically marginalized groups.

For example, in Colombia, where COVID-19 disrupted traditional supply chains and markets nationwide, USAID worked with the U.S. Development Finance Corporation and seven local microfinance institutions to guarantee an additional \$35 million in productive loans to micro businesses affected by COVID lockdowns. With USAID assistance, state and municipal

authorities in Mexico developed new interventions during the initial phase of the pandemic to stop domestic violence against women before it potentially progressed to femicide; in the unique COVID context, new protection and victim response models tailor services to victims' needs while supporting state authorities to better prosecute these crimes. In the Dominican Republic, USAID's programs with the private sector are providing food assistance to more than 270,000 people to supplement government relief efforts and reach targeted vulnerable populations affected by the pandemic. In Paraguay, USAID is helping 6,500 micro and small businesses overcome the economic consequences of the pandemic by improving housing structures and providing support such as training in entrepreneurship and business plan development so that vulnerable people can set up micro-businesses in their homes. In Jamaica, USAID provided laptops and tablets to keep children connected to school in the absence of face-to-face classes, in support of the Government of Jamaica's one tablet or laptop per child initiative. In Ecuador, where economic exclusion of vulnerable populations has been exacerbated by the pandemic, USAID programs enabled nearly 22,000 Ecuadorians and Venezuelans to access formal financial services by opening a savings account and/or obtaining a credit product or facility from a bank or other financial institution. And in El Salvador, USAID helped 4,370 small and medium-sized enterprises in fiscal year 2021, including more than 780 micro, small, and medium businesses that received direct support for economic recovery due to COVID-19.

Our efforts have not gone unnoticed. Partner nations regularly recognize and thank the United States for our steadfast support in the face of this unprecedented emergency. We have seen expressions of gratitude on social media from everyday people in countries like Paraguay, where one recipient of U.S.-donated vaccines posted, "Hope is what keeps us connected to life. Thank you, U.S.!" Honduran officials have stated that their vaccination campaigns, which have raised the number of Hondurans who are fully vaccinated from less than one percent in July to 43 percent in early November, "would not be possible" without COVID-19 vaccine donations from the United States and USAID's assistance for vaccine distribution and administration to the people. The Government of Peru has repeatedly thanked the U.S. for life-saving COVID-19 support, including donation of 2 million doses of vaccine, eight mobile military hospitals, personal protective equipment, and other technical assistance. This kind of solidarity reminds us all that this pandemic affects the entire world and we must continue to be good neighbors, partners, and friends so that we can overcome this challenge together. We're safe when everyone is safe.

We must remain vigilant to ensure that this kind of progress can continue. While conditions in the region have improved, and we are in a better place than we were only a few months ago, the pandemic has taught us that we cannot become complacent and must guard against future variants and surges. USAID programming continues, including with *American Rescue Plan Act* (ARPA) funding generously appropriated by this Congress. As part of our commitment to localization, a portion of USAID's programming in the region under ARPA will be managed by local partners. We will continue to work with countries to increase vaccination rates, including for marginalized or underserved populations, so that people can be better protected against severe illness. We will continue to support surveillance of and testing for COVID-19 so that we can stop the spread of the virus. We will continue to provide crucial training and medical supplies, including oxygen, so that the most critical patients can be treated and healed. And we

will continue our support for longer-term development programs to help the region recover and emerge from the pandemic with as little disruption as possible.

### **Conclusion**

As it is around the world, the COVID-19 situation in Latin America and the Caribbean remains dangerous. However, thanks to the generosity of the American people and the support of Congress, USAID has been able to help the countries of the region make real progress despite the unprecedented health and economic impacts of the pandemic. Even as we maintain our vigilance and continue to respond to the virus, we remain committed to helping countries adapt to new realities presented by the pandemic and shore up hard-won development gains.

Ultimately, we seek to help the people of the region live in peace and prosperity and realize a more healthy, hopeful future.