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USAID Advancing Nutrition

Kyrgyz Republic: Going Virtual to Reach Families with Nutrition Information during the Global Pandemic

In mid-March 2020, the Kyrgyz Republic government declared a state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This led to a nationwide lockdown and prohibition of any public events, community meetings, or other gatherings. Health care facilities were overwhelmed by the demands and priorities of the COVID-19 outbreak, and qualified evidence-based nutrition and hygiene information became more difficult for the general public to access.

USAID Advancing Nutrition, the Agency's flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project, was already planning a multi-year community outreach effort in the Kyrgyz Republic when the pandemic hit. With a cadre of trained community volunteers, also known as activists, the project planned to disseminate nutrition and hygiene information through home-visits and community meetings. This is no longer possible given the lockdown and restrictions.

In response, USAID Advancing Nutrition needed to act quickly, adapting its nutrition programming to the limitations of life during a pandemic while ensuring the health and safety of its staff, volunteers, and program participants. In collaboration with the Association of Kyrgyz Village Health Committees (KVHC), USAID Advancing Nutrition virtually recruited a network of activists in the project's implementation areas within Batken Oblast.

Instead of in-person training, the project used group calls and texts via WhatsApp to train activists on social mobilization, nutrition, and hygiene topics. The trainings prepared the activists to deliver clear messages and promote the project's 11 evidence-based nutrition and hygiene practices within their community networks. These practices improve the nutritional status of women and children in the 1,000-Day Window of Opportunity from pregnancy to a child's second birthday.

Activists come from various backgrounds; they are often teachers, housewives, retirees, and local government representatives who disseminate key nutrition messages directly to households. They are well-positioned to promote this awareness effort because they have access to diverse community groups. One activist, school teacher Urnisa Anarbai kyz from Zardaly village in Batken rayon, said, "I was not completely aware about the direct correlation of healthy nutrition to the well-being of my children and myself before. I will now disseminate nutrition messages to the whole village."

To transition from an in-person to a virtual program, USAID Advancing Nutrition adapted its training modules and visual materials to online, digital formats. After being trained, activists began making virtual visits to community members. Using WhatsApp calls and text messaging, they provided counseling and disseminated nutrition and hygiene as they would have done in person during a home visit. Since July 2020, USAID



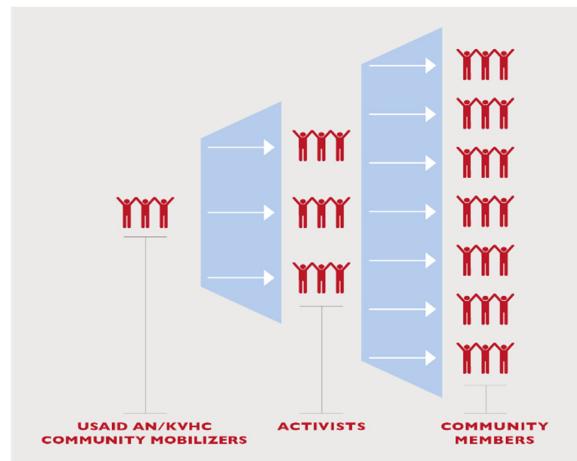
Activist Bagyshova Shakarbubu from Kulundu village with her family. Photo: USAID Advancing Nutrition.

Advancing Nutrition and KVHC mobilizers have trained almost 1,200 activists, who are projected to reach about 21,000 community members in Batken Oblast.

Nuriza Uzakbay kyz, a school teacher from Kara-Tumshuk village in Kadamjay rayon, shared her experience participating in an online visit with the project's activist Baktygul Ganieva: "Since I work in a school, I planned to stop breastfeeding my son who is 13 months old. Sister Baktygul contacted me through WhatsApp and provided a lot of useful information on the importance of continued breastfeeding. I changed my mind and decided to continue breastfeeding up to two years. I really liked the presentation of information and electronic materials that were shared. These are crucial messages and I also want to help activists to disseminate them through parent committees."

Other activists emphasized their enthusiasm for teaching the importance of good nutrition and hygiene to mothers and caretakers and for contributing to positive change in their communities. Sydykov Aymbek, an activist and imam from Chuvai village in Kadamjai rayon, said, "Fathers should pay more attention to breastfeeding mothers."

Trained to conduct outreach virtually, the activists will continue their roles as online nutrition influencers, disseminating knowledge about good nutrition and hygiene in an accessible format using WhatsApp, Zoom, direct text messages (SMS), and other platforms. Although the national COVID-19 outbreak presented distinct uncertainties in the Kyrgyz Republic, the flexibility of activists, KVHC, and USAID Advancing Nutrition allowed for a successful pivot to online engagement. By quickly moving its training program and community engagement online, USAID Advancing Nutrition is able to reach its priority audiences and work toward improving nutrition and hygiene practices, even in this time of crisis.



USAID Advancing Nutrition, or USAIDдүн "Мыкты Азыктануу" долбоору, has worked in the Kyrgyz Republic since October 2019, with a focus on Batken Oblast. We work to improve the nutritional status of women of reproductive age and children under 5 in the Kyrgyz Republic, with a focus on the 1,000-day Window of Opportunity. Working closely with partners in national and local governments, village health committees, district-level health centers, and other nutrition stakeholders, we aim to—

- improve knowledge, attitudes, and motivation related to healthy nutrition practices, including increased use of facility-based nutrition services
- improve demand for a variety of nutritious foods while increasing access to these foods year-round
- improve the capacity of the health system to plan, deliver, and monitor nutrition services
- build the capacity of local institutions that deliver nutrition services
- advocate for improved policies and resource allocation for nutrition services.



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USAID Advancing Nutrition is the Agency's flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project, addressing the root causes of malnutrition to save lives and enhance long-term health and development.

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