**Pan-American Regional Symposium on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Healthcare Facilities**

**“An urgent action”**

**October 14th 2020**

PAHO hosted a virtual regional meeting, broadcast on the PAHO YouTube Life channel, which brought together over 300 participants from 19 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) including representatives from health and water and sanitation government agencies, academia, and other technical and financial partners.

The aim of the event was to motivate national health and water and sanitation authorities of LAC countries to improve the quality of care in the provision of health services in a coordinated and collaborative way, seeking to reduce the risk of infections in patients, caregivers, health workers and communities, through access to quality water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services in healthcare facilities (HCF).

The symposium agenda consisted of six sections. In the first section, the United Nations Secretary General gave a motivational video message followed by welcoming remarks from high level PAHO, WHO and UNICEF representatives. A call to action to improve WASH services in healthcare facilities was highlighted and Member States were urged to carry out detailed assessments of the availability and quality of these services as key components of infection prevention and control programs. In addition, countries were called to develop and implement roadmaps to ensure that all healthcare facilities have safe and reliable water supplies, an adequate number of toilets or latrines, and managed in a safe and accessible way. It was recommended to promote the creation of strong partnerships to support the countries in the improvement of WASH services, as well as for the joint monitoring program of these services in the region.

In the second section, the first ladies of Paraguay, Argentina and Colombia gave motivational messages for the achievement of universal access to WASH in healthcare facilities by 2030. They highlighted the need for safe and sustainable water management, as well as ensuring universal access, which is linked to health, food, and the environment. They also highlighted that hand washing has been essential during the COVID 19 pandemic to save millions of lives. However, it was evident that one of the main obstacles has been the lack of adequate WASH in healthcare facilities. In this regard, they proposed to work together with Heads of State to create synergies and support the efforts of national authorities to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs), especially those associated with universal health. They highlighted the right to safe WASH services, including solid waste management, and the need to improve the access and quality to these services. Finally, they made a call to involve all first ladies of LAC to use their convening and advocacy power and skills to align different sectors and guarantee timely interventions and successful results.

In the third section, representatives of PAHO, WHO, and UNICEF presented technical cooperation issues that are being promoted in LAC to achieve the objective of the event from the perspective of environmental determinants of heath, antimicrobial resistance, and access to quality health services. This session highlighted, for example, the need for urgent integrative actions to change the reality of infections in unclean newborn deliveries, which represent 26% of neonatal deaths and 11% of maternal mortality. Together, both factors account for more than one million deaths each year worldwide. Guaranteeing access to WASH services would reduce the probability of contracting infections in health services, as well as the spread of resistant pathogens.

In the fourth section, the United Nations rapporteur on the human rights to safe water presented an infographic summarizing the situation of WASH services in healthcare facilities in seven LAC countries. This was followed by presentations of the national health and water and sanitation authorities of Bolivia and Mexico. They presented the challenges their countries face to achieve the provision of quality WASH services in healthcare facilities and made commitments to continue working toward improving such services. Bolivia has become a leading country in the region for promoting the human right to safe WASH services and proposed to assess these services in all healthcare facilities and to update its solid waste standards. In Mexico, the COVID 19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of water with an adequate level of chlorine, as well as the need to wash hands appropriately. The country has placed emphasis on strengthening healthcare facilities and communities in the most vulnerable conditions. Lastly, LAC countries expressed commitments to advance the improvement of WASH services in healthcare facilities. Their most important action would be to promote a greater involvement of the health sector in the management of WASH services in HCF.

In the fifth section, the Inter-American Development Bank moderated a panel of technical and financial non-governmental organizations. All panelists highlighted the importance of the provision of safe WASH services in healthcare facilities, with emphasis on populations in vulnerable conditions, and made a commitment to continue working on this issue. To date, 31 nongovernmental organizations have signed a letter addressed to LAC countries in which they ask them to follow the WHO and PAHO recommendations and offer their support.

Finally, the closing remarks of the event were presented by the director of PAHO’s Department of Communicable Diseases and Environmental Determinants of Health. He made a call to action and emphasized that WASH services are essential for HCF not only in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic but also due to other diseases such as Zika. It is a central element of the 2030 Agenda. He made a final plea to all policy makers and participants to continue working on this issue to help improve health and well-being for all populations of LAC.