Celebrating Accomplishments in the Care and Support Zika-Affected Children and Families

The ASSIST Project coordinated the USAID Care and Support for Infants, Mothers, and Families affected by Zika conference in Panama City from April 24th – 26th, 2019. Representatives from various USAID funded projects, Ministries of Health, UNICEF, PAHO, Save the Children, and NGOs from 18 Latin American and Caribbean countries attended to share lessons learned and recommendations for future emergency epidemics, with a focus on best practices relating to improving the quality of both clinical and non-clinical care, developing integrated models of access, bridging gaps between health care facilities and the community, and sustainability.

One key theme of the meeting was best practices around screening and locating infants affected by congenital Zika syndrome and linking them to health services. Dr. Shivon Belle-Jarvis, a pediatrician and focal person in the Antigua and Barbuda Ministry of Health, gave a dynamic presentation on the Antiguan experience with improving the quality of care for Zika affected children and families, which included the roll out of a new software program specifically created for surveillance and better care and support of babies and families potentially affected by Zika. This Zika case management tool — or ZiCaMas — developed by the ASSIST project with funding from USAID, enables health care providers to identify, better track and navigate these babies and their families in the system to receive timely clinical and non-clinical care based on their needs. The software has been launched and its early benefits already have been seen in Antigua and Barbuda. “This software is awesome because it allows us to not only look at the mothers but also children and... monitor quality of care that is offered in hospitals and health facilities nationwide, whether public or private” pediatrician and case manager, Dr Shivon Belle-Javis said to local newspaper.

The ZiCaMas tool is also being used in Dominica, St Kitts and Nevis, and St Vincent and the Grenadines, which are all receiving short term technical assistance from the ASSIST Project. The tool was co-developed with substantial input from health care providers and Ministry of Health officials from all 4 countries and American Academy of Paediatrics and has the potential to be used regionally to generate comparable data and inform case management and surveillance of Zika and other similar conditions resulting neurodevelopmental disabilities. Indeed, during the Panama meeting, other countries (e.g. Jamaica, Barbados) expressed the interest to adopt and
utilize the tool to provide timely, better quality and coordinated care to affected babies and their families.

There were other great tools, resources and experiences shared by participating countries in the Panama meeting developed with USAID support. While it can be celebrated that Zika has waned in the Caribbean and Latin America since the 2016 peak, scientists feel certain the disease will be back. Previous outbreaks of other viruses in the same genetic family as Zika, such as chikungunya, have followed a similar pattern. The ZiCaMas tool is one of the pillars to build capacity of LAC countries that are now better equipped for the monitoring, detection and care essential to containing and treating similar public health emergencies. “We know that these children will get older, but are we as a national prepared to deal with these children and their families?” … with ZiCaMas software, “we can know not only how to respond to Zika but other epidemics that may arise in the future” Dr Belle-Javis explained.