

Locally founded organization brings aid to Bolivia

By Jasmine Hall
Enterprise Staff Writer

Most parents in the United States don't not have to worry about child-birth mortality, access to clean, running water, or distress over contraception, but for those living in rural Bolivia, these are harsh realities.

The Global Midwife Education Foundation, founded by Park County Health Department Officer and HealthCare Family Physician Genevieve Reid, has made it its mission to reduce maternal and infant mortality and morbidity in rural areas of the developing world.

GMEF, along with the Bolivian Ministry of Health, has pinpointed root causes of these mortalities in remote, impoverished Bolivian villages and has recruited the help of Livingston Rotary Club to bring help to these areas.

Reid, who is also the organization's executive director, said the program has focused efforts in Bolivia since 2010 — returning to the area biannually to help educate medical individuals, as well as increase sanitation and hygienic conditions.

"There are a lot of different approaches you can take for reducing (maternal and infant mortality)," Reid said, "trying to look at the underlying causes of maternal and infant mortality and then address those independently."

GMEF has focused on the country because as of 2014, it had the highest maternal and infant mortality rate in Latin America, Reid said. To lower these death rates, the program has concentrated on cost-effective solutions, including contraception programs, and clean water and sanitation projects.

Contraception

One approach to reducing maternal and infant mortality is contraception training for physicians, as well as increased access to contraception in these rural areas.

During Reid's latest visit to the Bolivia, physician training was focused on subdermal, or under the skin, birth control implants, which are similar to United States products such as NEXPLANON.

"(Birth control's) a basic human right — basic health care right," Reid said. "And women in impoverished areas do not have this basic choice."

In 2015, GMEF purchased 800 implants for rural women, of which 600 were used. Reid said contraception access is important for women in rural Bolivia, since large families lead to higher poverty. She said it is not uncommon for 30-year-old women to have large families with eight or more children.

"By empowering women with the right to choose the number of children they want to have, you're allowing them to make economic gains and hopefully choose education for their children over work," Reid said. "When you have 12 children it's really difficult to allow all of your children to go to school because one person working at a subsistence job is not going to feed 12 people ... it recreates the cycle of poverty."

Not only is poverty linked with contraception access and education, it is also connected with higher risk of pregnancy-related deaths. Reid said there are 300,000 pregnancy-related deaths among women worldwide, and access to contraception could reduce that number by one-third.

Sanitation and hygiene

Although accessible contraception and education is important, the most cost-effective way to lower infant and maternal mortality is through proper sanitation and hygiene, Reid said. Bathrooms and proper hygiene prevent chronic diarrhea, which is the underling cause of both chronic malnutrition and anemia, Reid said.

"If you have those things, malnutrition and anemia," she said, "you're much more likely to die as an infant and much more likely to die as a woman laboring."

Reid said, of the 5 million children around the world who die before the age of 5, most of the deaths are associated with malnutrition and anemia. It is because of hygienic and sanitary conditions' link to child mortality



This undated photo pictures a healthy baby who was born in Bolivia with the help of a trained Global Midwife Education Foundation birth attendant.

Photo courtesy of Genevieve Reid



Children flush a new in-home toilet in Chifloca, Bolivia.

Photo courtesy of Genevieve Reid

that Reid said projects in "Water And Sanitation Hygiene," or WASH, are fundamental to any development work.

"Really, any responsible (nongovernmental organization) working in development in the poor world should be having projects in WASH," she said. "Because it's really impossible to make health gains or economic gains if people don't have clean water or sanitation."

With a high need for bathrooms in rural areas of Bolivia, GMEF has helped construct 805 in-home bathrooms in about 45 communities with already-established water systems.

Describing the conditions in Bolivia as "extreme poverty," Reid said houses often have no electricity, dirt floors and are adobe-like structures, but what is most difficult for these families is the absence of "safety nets."

"Sometimes there's no money in the house and there's no bank account," she said. "So what happens if you need a ride to town, and your baby's sick, and it costs \$3 dollars to get to town?"

Volunteers and funding

Livingston resident Cara McNeely volunteered as an interpreter for GMEF in southern Bolivia and saw first-hand the rural living conditions and met families.

"These people live on such a thin margin," McNeely recalled. "They're subsistence farmers; they don't have cash in the house; they trade for goods."

McNeely said communities would often have to resort to using water from the river, and in some communities, bathrooms are nonexistent — people going outside.

Presenting a photo taken on her travels, McNeely showed a mother's kitchen sans flooring, sinks or any modernization, with a jumble of pots and a chair as her sink area. She

was a mother to 12 children. "Even when things are stable they're not very stable," McNeely said. "... You're with people that live with nothing."

McNeely's trip to Tupiza, Bolivia, required three planes, a four-hour bus drive and a 13-and-a-half-hour train ride to arrive in the city where she translated Spanish for midwives' GMEF U.S. medical teachers.

While on her trip, she translated for medical training on clean home births, baby recitation and subdermal birth control implants, as well as collected data for home health surveys. Her role as a translator for medical and GMEF teacher helped facilitate the highly needed services GMEF supplies to the country.

"This area of Bolivia is so under served because it's so



Photos courtesy of Cara McNeely
ABOVE: A Bolivian girl walks down the street in the mining town of Siete Suyos, near Atocha, Bolivia. Atocha is a town of 500 people that has only one bathroom for the community, said Global Midwife Education Foundation volunteer translator Cara McNeely.

LEFT: A chair and miscellaneous pots serve as the kitchen in a home, which lacks running water, of a Bolivian mother of 12.

remote," McNeely said. "And it's very impoverished. So I think there's a need for these services."

While Reid said U.S. volunteers often travel with GMEF to help with projects and programs, most of the volunteers are Bolivian natives, since under the program, families are responsible for providing the labor for their own bathroom projects.

"We've had over 800 families participate in bathroom projects," Reid said. "I mean, they build all those bathrooms themselves, and how many people is that?"

With no shortage of volunteers, Reid said the main obstacle for GMEF is funding.

To help with GMEF's bathroom projects, Livingston Rotary Club has begun to raise \$10,000 for a GMEF Bolivian bathroom project — building 50 bathrooms at \$200 a piece.

Already raising between \$750 and \$1,000, and with plans to apply for Rotary International grant to cover half the cost, Livingston Rotary Club President Andy Turner said the group intends to raise the remaining money locally.

access to a hospital in these rural areas, living as far as 10 to 16 hours away. Due to distance or lack of transportation, the women are often forced to give birth at home, leaving them at a higher maternal-death risk.

"Institutional birth, even at a birth center like that, are associated with a 50 percent reduction in maternal mortality," Reid said.

To learn more, or to donate to GMEF, visit the website at www.midwifeeducation.org.



Town Hall Meeting

Thursday, Jan. 7
1-3 p.m. and 5:30-7:30 p.m.

Park County Senior Center
206 S. Main St., Livingston, MT

Montana Independent Living Project is sponsoring a town hall meeting to discuss access to health care and recreational opportunities for persons with disabilities.

This forum is for people with disabilities, family members and friends to discuss community barriers to the following:

- Transportation
- Community Design
- Attitudes and Communication
- Other barriers to accessibility and inclusion that are of concern

Refreshments will be available and accommodations provided with advance notice. If you are interested in attending, please contact Cindy at (406) 522-7300 or email at csmith@milp.us

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