MENNONITE CENTRAL COMMITTEE (MCC) NEWS RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Summary: MCC is well positioned through its ongoing water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health and food programs to address the threats of COVID-19 for some of the world’s most vulnerable people, including people displaced from their homes.

MCC programs well positioned to address COVID-19 threats
By Linda Espenshade with additions from Doug and Naomi Enns

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As COVID-19 spreads and worsens, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) continues its worldwide work while attending to the health and well-being of its staff.

MCC is well positioned through its ongoing water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health and food programs to address the threats of COVID-19 for some of the world’s most vulnerable people, including people displaced from their homes. In times of crisis, those who are most vulnerable suffer the most. Where possible, MCC is scaling up this work.

Many MCC partner organizations bolster health efforts by providing training about nutrition, hygiene and disease prevention; and by strengthening access to food and clean water. MCC also supports several hospitals and clinics that serve people already at risk.

“Much of the work that MCC does around the world with vulnerable populations is helpful in a pandemic like COVID-19,” says Paul Shetler Fast, MCC’s health coordinator.

“The principles of MCC’s work in WASH are helpful across a broad range of infectious diseases, including epidemics like cholera, Ebola and now COVID-19,” Fast says. “Just as we are being reminded to wash our hands and practice good hygiene to prevent spread, our WASH partners around the world are working on these same types of issues. This is a truly global pandemic impacting every corner of the world.”

To help people who have been displaced by war or other disasters, MCC sends hygiene kits and relief kits. Hygiene kit shipments are on their way to Jordan, Ukraine and Mozambique, says Bruce Guenther, MCC’s director of disaster response.

Locally purchased hygiene supplies will be distributed to displaced people in Lebanon, Syria and Malawi along with food packages that were already scheduled, Guenther says. To decrease the health risks to partner staff and volunteers who distribute supplies, MCC is providing locally purchased masks and gloves, adding extra handwashing stations at some distribution points and adapting distributions to ensure physical distancing.
MCC’s food distributions and agricultural work remain critical, Fast says. “Our food security and malnutrition partners around the world are trying to ensure that the most vulnerable families can access the basic nutrition their bodies need to fight off a new pathogen.”

For example, 250 families living at Mubimbi Camp in the Democratic Republic of the Congo will continue to need food distributions to supplement the crops they can grow in fields rented for them by MCC’s partner Église du Christ au Congo (Church of Christ in Congo).

They need the nutrition, Fast says, because “people who are malnourished have weakened immune systems and are particularly at risk for COVID-19.”

One MCC-supported mobile clinic serves the people of Mubimbi and neighboring Poste Camp, where people went to escape violence from armed groups in their rural home communities. The nurses are equipped to help people recover from malaria and other common illnesses. Now they will need to be alert to any signs of coronavirus, so they can refer them for a higher level of care.

MCC also supports clinics and hospitals in other countries whose primary focus is on primary care, emergency medicine, maternal and child health, and HIV and mental health treatment.

“These health providers are on the front line as their communities are impacted by COVID-19 – not only helping in some cases with prevention and treatment, but also dealing with the rippling health impacts of the pandemic for vulnerable groups,” says Fast.

Yet the spread of the coronavirus is forcing MCC to carry out its ministry with less funding, travel and staff in some places.

Domestically and internationally, MCC staff are telecommuting wherever possible, continuing MCC’s work with partners and constituents virtually. Trainings and meetings have been canceled, postponed or moved to virtual events.

In some countries, such as India and South Africa, where governments have issued nationwide lockdowns, MCC’s work is limited. Getting canned meat and other supplies to nursing homes and hospitals in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea has been delayed because of a closed port.

MCC is not suspending or ending staff assignments at this time, but some participants in MCC’s young adult programs – Seed, Serving and Learning Together (SALT) and Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN) – have chosen to end their assignments and return home early or their placements were closed due to COVID-19 requirements. MCC is actively helping all personnel who make this decision, as well as those who remain.

MCC Thrift shops in Canada and the U.S. are temporarily shuttered, drying up funding that averaged more than $1.2 million a month in 2019. Ten relief sales have canceled or postponed sales this spring, events that last year brought in more than $1.7 million.
Material resources centers across Canada and the U.S. are closed to the thousands of volunteers who come each week to sew and prepare hygiene kits and other items for shipping overseas. Nevertheless, MCC has a three-month reserve of kits and comforters ready to be sent.

The 2019-2020 meat canning season ended in March instead of April, but with 500,000 cans of meat, enough to meet the requests from MCC’s partners for the next 12 months, says Tom Wenger, MCC’s material resources coordinator.

MCC’s work has been limited by the pandemic but working with marginalized groups remains a priority. In Europe we continue to assist churches in peacebuilding and integration work to increase social stability and decrease community violence.

Support continues for the most vulnerable through Almere’s drop-in center, and Friedenshaus in Germany but without in-person consultations. Mediation Northern Ireland has refocused the ways it continues to support front line community workers in virtual ways.

So far, only a few centennial celebrations have been postponed or canceled, but organizers of alumni gatherings and other MCC celebrations will be following the advice of local health authorities and other government guidelines as the pandemic evolves.

“In the face of this challenge, we continue to see how all of us across the broad MCC community and around the world are interconnected beyond our ethnicity, faith, location and nationality,” says J Ron Byler, executive director of MCC U.S. “Despite the challenge of needing to come together when we are not physically able to do so, our commitment to face this crisis together remains strong.”

In Europe, MCC stands in solidarity supporting our partner organization, Church and Peace, in their advocacy with the European Union on assistance to migrants and those stranded at the borders and displaced from their homes.

Donations to support the ongoing work of MCC, including its intensified work in response to COVID-19, can be designated to “where needed most” through the MCC West Europe Office or your local country Mennonite relief agency. During 2020 we are working together with our European Mennonite Relief agencies and churches towards a Centennial Relief shipment that will send relief kits, school kit supplies and comforters to vulnerable persons in need in Jordan through MCC.

“Times of uncertainty call us to dig deeper into faith – to cast all our anxiety on God because God cares so deeply for us,” says Rick Cober Bauman, executive director of MCC Canada. “We believe this is a time to recommit ourselves to caring for our neighbors and acting generously – whether in our homes, across the street, or around the world.”

Mennonite Central Committee: Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ – END –
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Photos available: To download these photos, please visit the News Service 2020 photo collection. If you have any questions or need help with the system, contact Brendaburkholder@mcc.org.

Photo #78397: Dr. Chris Isichei, director and founder of Faith Alive Foundation and a physician at the Faith Alive clinic and hospital in Jos, Nigeria, talks with Josephine Eze, a patient with HIV, and her son Destiny Eze in 2017. MCC supports Faith Alive and other hospitals and clinics that already serve vulnerable patients. They will be critical to preventing the spread of COVID-19. MCC photo/Matthew Lester

Photo #64973: MCC partner Middle East Council of Churches distributed MCC relief kits, which contain hygiene supplies, to the most vulnerable displaced people and host community members in a neighborhood in the Syriac Orthodox diocese in Aleppo, Syria, in 2016. This year, MCC’s partners in Syria and Lebanon will distribute individual hygiene kits and food to help people protect themselves from the coronavirus. Names are withheld for security reasons. Photo courtesy of MECC

Photo #88316: Thiciano Pareja Saucedo, 8, washes her hands at El Comedor de Niños, an after-school program for children in the Montero area of Bolivia, about an hour from Santa Cruz. One of its main goals is to improve nutrition and health outcomes in the community by teaching children about healthy eating, gardening and hygiene. MCC photo/Matthew Sawatsky