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Interview with Lloyd Feinberg from the Leahy War Victims Fund

The Leahy War Victims Fund is one of the world’s leading contributors to the treatment and rehabilitating survivors of armed conflict. The Fund has supported the successful passage of disability related legislation in Vietnam, and is working for similar results elsewhere. In Africa, The Leahy War Victims Fund is spearheading the ambitious Omega Initiative, which aims to bring various types of aid to the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Lloyd Feinberg represents the Fund on many fronts; he is widely respected and recognized as both an authority and a humanitarian.

by David Hartley, MAIC

Introduction

Established as a result to Congression legislative action in 1989 by Vermont Senator Patrick J. Leahy, the Leahy War Victims Fund (LWVF) has worked in war torn countries to provide people with disabilities access to prosthetic services. The Leahy War Victims Fund has become one of the world’s leading contributors to rehabilitating disabled individuals. To date, the Fund has provided more than $92 million (U.S.) in aid to more than 26 countries, often primarily benefiting individuals affected by landmines and UXO.

The Fund’s namesake, Senator Leahy, is a pioneer in the field of landmine regulation. He sponsored an amendment to stop the U.S. exportation of unexploded ordnance, especially in those areas along the old Ho Chi Minh Trail. Both the Xing Khouang province and the Houa Phana province were heavily affected areas, and the issue is that many people who explore those UXO have generalized trauma. Of course, if a child picks one up, it is often fatal. As opposed to landmines, which are meant to cause limb-loss, UXO cause general and extreme trauma.

People are dying as a result of injuries and as a result of inappropriate or inadequate first response treatment. So our focus has been to strengthen the capacity of the district and provincial health services to deal with UXO related trauma.

The program has been a very unusual one, in that rather than relying on technical expertise from the United States to provide training, the program decided to work with and access local expertise from the Lao medical community within the country’s capital, whereby the country’s best local doctors and other medical professionals would participate and work with the provincial medical professional. In a country where language fluency is so important—Lao is not a very common language—we found this approach to have been very innovative and effective. The [program] is implemented by “The Consortium,” led by World Education and World Learning. The program also develops, disseminates and utilizes UXO and mine awareness materials which have been so effective that the government and other organizations in Vietnam have requested access to those materials. These materials that were developed in Laos are now being widely and effectively used in the Vietnamese awareness program.

Interview

David Hartley (DH): Please describe the UXO situation in Laos. What has the LWVF done to alleviate this problem?

Lloyd Feinberg (LF): In Laos, there are a massive amount of unexploded bombs. There was a very high usage of UXO in Laos. Landmines are not such a problem, but instead an infestation of unexploded ordnance, especially in those areas along the old Ho Chi Minh Trail. Both the Xing Khouang province and the Houa Phana province were heavily affected areas, and the issue is that many people who explore those UXO have generalized trauma. Of course, if a child picks one up, it is often fatal. As opposed to landmines, which are meant to cause limb-loss, UXO cause more generalized and extreme trauma.

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DH: Speaking of Vietnam, the LWVF has had a lot of success there. Is the situation in Vietnam similar to the one in Laos?

LF: No, in Vietnam landmines are more extensive. There are also lots of UXO as well, of course, but the major issue there is landmines. After the war, there were estimates of up to 250,000 amputees, which is really an extraordinary number. Therefore the program in Vietnam has been focused on strengthening the capacity to provide prosthetics. Although in the last two years we’ve made a shift to focus more on orthotics, which addresses people who—a result of injuries or diseases such as polio—have a need for bracing. Generally, there are 8-10 persons requiring bracing (orthotic devices) for every person requiring a prosthesis.

DH: Has the Leahy War Victims Fund had similar success elsewhere in the world?

LF: How we yet? No. Vietnam is the only country where we have had success in passing laws. We are proposing and hoping to do similar kind of activities, though, especially in Africa, under the Omega Initiative. In Sierra Leone, we supported a series of visits by disabilities experts, both from other third world countries and the World Health Organization, in order to launch a process of developing a national policy and national standards for disability programs. We hope to replicate this in other countries in Africa.

DH: You mentioned the Omega Initiative; what is it, and how will it help rehabilitate Sub-Saharan Africa?

LF: Essentially the Omega Initiative is a platform from which we hope to launch a number of rehabilitation activities and programs throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. The US NGO, Pact, manages this initiative with technical supervision provided by Veterans International [VI]. The Omega Initiative employs technical experts working full time, based in Nairobi. The objective is to identify countries there where there are great needs for war victims and people with disabilities, and to identify local indigenous organizations.
Helping Hands in a Shattered Republic: Victim Assistance in Chechnya

Chechnya has endured over eight years of grueling combat with Russia. Thousands of landmines have been sown throughout Chechnya and the victim toll is constantly increasing. Victim assistance throughout the Caucasus has become an essential element of rebuilding the lives of those affected by landmines.

by Hayden Roberts, MAIC

Introduction

The situation in war-ravaged Chechnya is bleak, and the outlook for the future does not look promising. When the war between Russia erupted in 1994, no one expected the fighting would escalate to the extent it has. Not only has the war claimed the lives of those who are combatants, but it has also affected those civilians who reside in the republic. Landmines and other unexploded ordnance (UXO) have been the main cause of this far-reaching and increasing victim toll. Sadly, these civilians trip landmines while doing common, day-to-day tasks such as taking animals to pasture, collecting firewood or simply playing with friends. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "approximately 4,000 Chechen children have been maimed or killed by mines" since the first war broke out, and a combined total of 7,000 to 10,000 people in Chechnya have fallen victim to landmines during the two wars. Unfortunately, for these people, not much demining can be done until the war comes to an end. Despite this, there are many groups out there dedicated to helping the Chechens overcome their terrible struggle with landmines.

In some countries, where international organizations have been managing services and have reached a very high level of proficiency, when the country's government began to take over management of the facilities, budget levels, quality of care and the number of patients served all dropped significantly. It is our feeling that, had some of the NGOs been able to operate more freely, they would have been able to attract private funds and other donor funds that could not go to the government.

In addition, we also feel that the focus on patient care is, in many cases, just as important—if not more important—than the type of device that is being used. We put a lot of emphasis on the training of supportive supervision and capacity-building of service delivery to orthopedic patients.