

# PAHO/WHO Collaborating Centers: celebrating the achievement of our common goals

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The Region of the Americas has benefitted from the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) Collaborating Centers (CCs) since 1950 when the first CC was designated at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in the United States of America. Since then, the CCs have supported the Organization in several important public health areas, such as nursing, communicable diseases, health promotion, mental health, emergency response, and others.

The CCs are comprised of institutions such as universities, hospitals, research institutes, academies or ministries which are designated by the WHO Director-General to undertake activities in alignment with PAHO/WHO objectives and mandates. Given PAHO's dual role as the WHO Regional Office for the Americas (AMRO) and the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, the WHO CCs located in the Region of the Americas are known as PAHO/WHO CCs. Currently there are over 800 CCs globally across 80 Member States, with currently 174 CCs located in 16 Member States in the Americas, and two CCs located outside the Region.

The PAHO/WHO CCs offer a wealth of expertise, knowledge, and capacity that contribute to and support PAHO/WHO's program of work. This is achieved through the development of joint workplans that support the attainment of global and regional strategic objectives, enhance the scientific validity of PAHO/WHO's global and regional work, and strengthen the institutional capacity in Member States and regions. This collaboration brings mutual benefits to both parties as PAHO/WHO expands its access to top institutions worldwide and gains valuable support for its work.

Similarly, institutions designated as a CC increase their visibility and recognition by national authorities and the general public. In addition, the CCs have the opportunity to work together to share objectives, exchange information, and pool resources, particularly at the international level.

In recent years, PAHO/WHO has worked to ensure that the CC joint workplans are not only aligned to the WHO's General Programme of Work, but also with the regional mandates and priorities, PAHO's Strategic Plan 2020–2025, and the Sustainable Health Agenda for the Americas 2018–2030. This alignment also ensures that the CC support is linked to PAHO's response to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 17 (South-South, North-North and Multilateral Cooperation), as well as the PAHO's Cross Cutting Themes (equity, gender, ethnicity, and human rights). This important alignment is also presented periodically as information documents during PAHO's Governing Body meetings (1, 2).

On 19–20 April 2021, PAHO convened all the CCs in the Region of the Americas for a webinar on *Engaging Our Partners to Achieve the SDGs Together* (3). As a result of this meeting, PAHO received recommendations to improve the working relationship with the CCs, increase the visibility of the CCs' work, and promote innovative ways of providing technical cooperation, among others. One of the key recommendations was to highlight the work of the CCs in the *Pan American Journal of Public Health*, which is consistent with the recommendation of the Evaluation of WHO's Work with Collaborating Centers to "Promote awareness of CCs and their contribution, both within WHO and with external audiences as appropriate (4)."

Within this context, a Call for Abstracts was issued in 2021. Sixty-four abstracts were received; 17 articles went through a peer-review process, and 16 were approved for publication. The articles selected present results that contribute to the development of evidence-based health policies, share lessons learned, provide recommendations, and identify best practices in the Region.

The articles published in this special issue illustrate how the CCs respond to public health needs in the Region and

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globally through PAHO/WHO's mandates in priority thematic areas. It includes highlights on how the CCs respond to non-communicable diseases and risk factors such as cervical cancer (5), childhood cancer, and substance abuse with articles on partnerships to implement the Global Initiative for Childhood Cancer in the Americas and the detection of alcohol consumption at the first level of care in Mexico (6, 7).

Furthermore, this special issue provides information on how the CCs address human resource needs for health, health services, and access to health. For instance, articles highlight the progress towards universal health in the Caribbean through the work of the Pan American Network of Nursing and Midwifery Collaborating Centres; how CCs strengthen the health workforce; and what challenges CCs faced in training health technicians during the COVID-19 pandemic (8-10). Selected articles also focus on the healthy aging and care of older adults with chronic disease in the Caribbean and a strategy to assess health risks in children in contaminated communities (11, 12).

The special issue also presents evidence on occupational health and violence prevention, including carcinogenic drug exposure among health-sector workers, the protection of healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic impact of violence (13-15).

This collection of articles details how the CCs addressed public health needs during the pandemic such as best practices in pandemic preparedness, an anti-infodemic virtual center for the Americas and promoting telemedicine in Latin America (16-18). In addition, articles showcase how the CCs support PAHO/WHO in addressing neglected tropical and vector-borne diseases, including the elimination of morbidity caused by neglected tropical diseases by 2030, and lessons learned from the implementation of integrated serosurveillance of communicable diseases (19, 20).

The CCs play a critical role in supporting PAHO to achieve the Five Pillars (21) that guide the Organization's work in support of its Member States for the next five years, and their contributions are instrumental to translate these pillars into tangible outcomes. In particular, the CCs have supported PAHO's pandemic response efforts and promoted equitable access to health technologies and innovations. They contribute through their support to health surveillance strengthening, efforts to detect and respond to emergencies, and the identification of new health technologies. The CCs also play a vital role in building resilient national health systems, focusing on training human resources, strengthening information systems, and embracing digital transformation. This collaborative approach not only reinforces PAHO's capacity in public health in the Region, but also provides vital support to Member States in achieving universal health.

I am confident that the successful initiatives and projects published in the *Pan American Journal of Public Health* will exemplify the important work that PAHO/WHO and the CCs are carrying out in the Americas, and the dissemination of the lessons learned will not only benefit the Region in our advancement of universal health, but also add value to technical cooperation globally.

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