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U.S. NGO Survey Paves the Way for Expanded Support for Agent Orange Victims in Laos

Chester, Vermont (December 12, 2024) – The War Legacy Project recently completed its [Laos Agent Orange Survey](#) through a six-year partnership with the Lao government, helping to pave the way for expanded supports and services for people with disabilities living in the southeast region of Lao PDR.

Since the survey's launch in 2018, approximately 769 children, young people, and adults with birth defects or disabilities associated with exposure to Agent Orange have been identified. The survey covered 241 villages across five of the 15 districts in southeastern Laos along the Vietnam border—an area heavily sprayed with Agent Orange and other tactical herbicides during the Secret War. This region, a remote and forested plateau of the Annamese Cordillera, transected by the former Ho Chi Minh Trail, is home to ethnic minorities of the Mon-Khmer linguistic group who are often not fluent in Lao. Many face significant challenges accessing affordable, appropriate healthcare and endure social discrimination.

The survey results brought to light the long-standing discrepancy in U.S. government recognition and support for affected people in Laos compared to those in similarly impacted regions in Vietnam.

In his final Foreign Appropriations bill before retiring in January 2023, Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont secured \$1.5 million for programs that “assist persons with severe physical mobility, cognitive, or developmental disabilities in areas sprayed with Agent Orange” in Laos. This marked the first congressional allocation specifically addressing Agent Orange-related public health concerns in Laos since the war ended in 1975.

This funding, included in the 2022, 2023 and 2024 fiscal year spending bills, enabled USAID to expand its Okard program—coordinated by World Education—to improve access to services for people with disabilities, regardless of cause, in Sepone and Nong districts in Savannakhet province and Dak Cheung district in Xekong province. Okard has also expanded to Kham and Khoun districts of Xieng Khouang province, an area heavily impacted by bombing during the war.

“Although our survey has ended,” says Susan Hammond, Executive Director of [War Legacies Project](#), “We remain committed to bringing renewed hope by expanding and improving services identified through the survey and providing sustainable livelihoods for all. The next phase of the work will focus on helping as many surveyed people as possible access appropriate medical care as long as funding is available.”

What more is needed to be done includes:

1. **Healthcare Access:** Training district-level medical staff to detect and refer disabilities to appropriate care levels, ensuring translation services, and deploying mobile clinics for follow-up care.
2. **Rehabilitation and Post-Care Services:** Enhancing local rehabilitation services, expanding the School Feeding program to include all children regardless of enrollment, and providing non-formal education programs that teach literacy and numeracy skills.
3. **Sustainable, Long-term Livelihoods:** Developing training programs beyond skills in textiles and industrial manufacturing to help people with disabilities establish sustainable livelihoods suited to their specific needs.

Despite significant progress in recent years, southeastern Laos—where the prevalence of disabilities, including cases potentially linked to Agent Orange, is high—remains the country's poorest and most underdeveloped region. Expanding services to additional districts in this region along the former Ho Chi Minh Trail is crucial, as are continued surveying efforts to better understand Agent Orange's human health impact in Laos.

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