

Helen Keller International sets its sights on ...

Preventing Blindness Worldwide

Kathy Spahn wants to put an end to preventable blindness.

As President and CEO of Helen Keller International (HKI), a New York-based nonprofit with established programs that prevent and treat blindness and malnutrition in 23 countries around the globe, she knows that nearly 75% of all blindness is preventable or treatable using techniques easily accessible in developed countries.

HKI works with local healthcare providers and within communities to prevent blindness. This includes promoting face cleaning and good hygiene to fight the infectious disease trachoma and addressing the root causes of preventable blindness, particularly vitamin A deficiency, the No. 1 cause of childhood blindness. Improving nutrition is a major focus for HKI. Ms. Spahn says, “The link between basic nutrition and vision is clear.”

Good nutrition not only improves eye health but is also important for overall health. HKI’s homestead food production programs in Africa and Southeast Asia start with a community or school garden that provides essential, vitamin-rich vegetables. Often, there is a surplus of food, which can be sold at a profit. Suddenly, the community sees both a health and an economic boost.

The success of HKI’s programs isn’t possible without strong corporate support. “I’m a firm believer in working hand in glove with the private sector,” says Ms. Spahn. “It’s the only way we can tackle these problems.” In India, for example, HKI partners with the H.J. Heinz Company, which manufactures a tasteless, odorless powder that can be sprinkled on food to add the recommended daily allowance of vitamins and minerals. HKI works closely with the government and local partners to mobilize the distribution of the “sprinkles” to children so they receive the nutrients they need to survive and thrive.

Diane Segalen, a Paris-based Vice Chairman of CTPartners, has been involved with HKI’s European affiliate since 1999. Ms. Segalen was so moved by HKI’s mission that she spent three weeks in India and Burma, delivering medical training materials and organizing transportation for patients. She comments, “By mobilizing human energy and dedicating capital, we can offer sight and hope for a better life to children and adults around the world.”

Ms. Spahn, who came to HKI in 2005 from the top job at ORBIS, another global nonprofit devoted to preventing and treating blindness, is always looking for opportunities to develop corporate partnerships. She’d like to attract more unrestricted support—funds that are not earmarked for a specific project or region—from global corporate donors in Europe, Asia, and the U.S.

“Unrestricted donations are critical for organizations like HKI to build infrastructure, such as information technology and human resources, and enable us to explore and seize new opportunities,” concludes Ms. Spahn. “Unrestricted dollars are the very best way companies can help.” ■



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President and CEO,
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Do You Want to Get Involved? Contact Helen Keller International at www.hki.org