

“SEHAT TAHAFFUZ” 1166 HELPLINE: REACHING PEOPLE WITH LIFESAVING INFORMATION

Background

Professional helplines, whether through phone calls, text or voice messaging, can enhance any health programme. They work to disseminate information, create lines of accountability, respond to rumours and misinformation, allow for direct communication with communities, and collect valuable information about perception and concerns. At their best, they reinforce healthy behaviours and help users make informed decisions.

Pakistan’s “Sehat Tahaffuz”(health protection) 1166 helpline was launched on the 8 November 2019 by the Polio Programme on the recommendation of the Polio Technical Advisory Group. It is the first-ever toll-free helpline established in Pakistan for handling health-related issues.

“Sehat Tahaffuz” was established to improve community perceptions about polio and immunisations through direct engagement with the public and help identify any challenges related to the polio campaign. Helpline staff deal with questions about polio and other vaccine-preventable diseases. They also address concerns over missed children and any complaints about vaccine services.

Goals

- To provide the public with accurate and timely information
- To support information gathering on public perceptions and misinformation.
- To help build public trust and guide caregivers to make positive decisions on vaccinations.
- To act as a monitoring tool for campaign quality.

Although “Sehat Tahaffuz” focused on Polio/EPI, it was fully operational when the COVID-19 pandemic reached Pakistan. Like many other polio resources, it was well-positioned to respond to the growing and urgent demand for public information on the

pandemic. In February 2020, the Health Ministry expanded services to include information about COVID-19. The helpline is now linked with National Immunisation Management System and the National Command Operation Center.

The call centre opened with 55 call staff; today, there are 145 to meet the public demand for information about the pandemic.



Key Tactics

The communication framework has set the following key priorities for helpline work in 2020- 2021:

- Sehat Tahaffuz Helpline 1166 will continue to engage with the public and ensure timely responses to critical challenges and questions. Services will be available in Urdu, Pashto and other local languages.
- In addition to answering questions, the helpline will track queries and complaints and direct information about each call to the Operational Team. A comprehensive digital system will be developed for monitoring and managing complaints.
- Time-sensitive issues, such as a parent noting their child was not vaccinated during a campaign, or a report of a potentially damaging rumours, are flagged and addressed promptly.
- A Polio WhatsApp helpline established in 2020 will continue with voice and text message services and complement 1166 efforts.
- Monitoring tools will be developed to address suggestions and input from the general public.

Helpline staff will continue to receive training and feedback on the quality of each interaction. These activities will help ensure interactions are non-judgemental, support the co-creation of vaccination plans, and offer respectful discussion on misinformation and rumours.

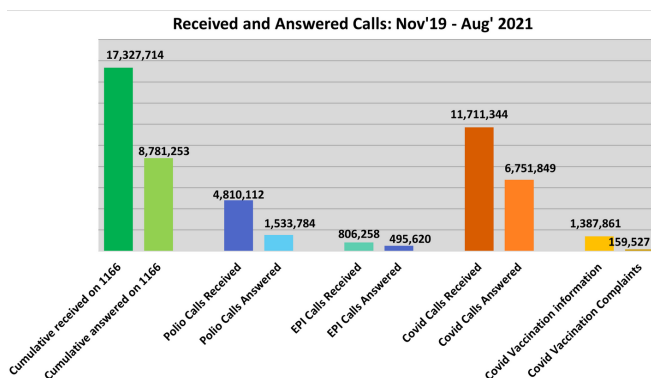
Response to COVID-19 Emergency

In 2020 the helpline take on new roles as it responded to high public demand for accurate information on COVID-19. Before the peak of the first wave of the pandemic, the helpline received about 3,000 polio related calls a day during the February 2020 campaign.

As the pandemic progressed and the helpline added COVID-19 information, calls increased to 50,000-70,000 per day. The centre's staff and capacity grew rapidly to meet the demand.

At present, the centre receives an average of 40,000 calls per day. From Nov 2019 to August 2021, a total of 15,745,577 calls related to polio, EPI, COVID-19 were received. In addition, 28,514 missed children were reported and followed up for vaccination.

The helpline will continue to support COVID-19 needs for as long as the pandemic continues. This includes responding to evolving questions and concerns as government policy evolve, infection rates change, and new questions emerge about the vaccine.



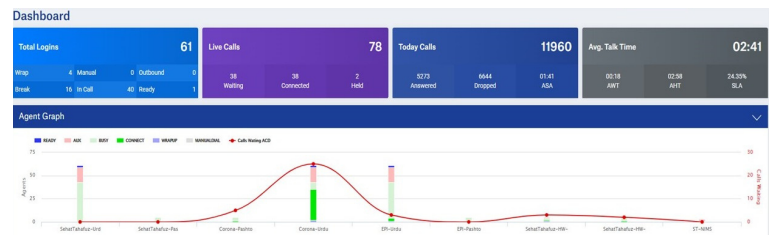
Challenges

The helpline faced a few growing pains in its first year of operation. The helpline experienced dropped calls due to high call volume and the call was not toll-free. These issues have been addressed with additional

staff and by making all calls toll-free.

Another challenge is maintaining service quality, especially at the point of caller/helpline interaction. This issue will have to be consistently monitored and measured against the programme's strategic goals.

Sehat Tahaffuz 1166 tracks call numbers using a random sampling method to monitor calls and conducts periodic surveys to gauge caller satisfaction. This impacts the quality, trust, accountability, and data collection of the overall campaign.



Way Forward

The helpline will continue to support COVID-19 needs for as long as the pandemic continues. This includes responding to evolving questions and concerns as government policy evolve, infection rates change, and new questions emerge about the vaccine.

As the helplines' monitoring and evaluation capacities are improved, so will the team's ability to measure outcomes across areas such as usage, user perception and behaviour, campaign quality, and misinformation tracking. Overall, the programme will be better equipped to monitor the impact of the helpline while improving services and the information it collects. The helpline should help build public trust, provided their complaints and concerns are addressed quickly and effectively, and callers are listened to with respect by well-trained staff.

The helpline will continue to be a valuable tool as new vaccines such as nOPV2 are introduced or if crises of misinformation emerge, such as the 'Peshawar Incident' in April 2019. A well-established helpline with the capacity to handle large call volumes and respond flexibly to concerns will be a significant asset in the future.

Given the growing need for trusted health information in Pakistan and the programme initial success, an investment case, supported by data and information, could be an option for supporting the institutionalisation of the helpline in the future.