

## Commentary

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### Marin Voice: After 25 years of progress on HIV, alliance prepares for challenging next steps



A GAIA Global Health mobile clinic nurse takes blood from a baby in Malawi. The Bay Area-based nonprofit is part of a global effort to reduce the number of HIV/AIDS cases. (courtesy photo)



By **TODD SCHAFER**

PUBLISHED: August 13, 2025 at 12:57 PM PDT

Twenty-five years ago, Marin resident Bill Rankin opted for an audacious retirement. He co-founded the Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance, an international health organization, with neurosurgeon Charlie Wilson to alleviate the suffering caused by HIV/AIDS in rural Africa.

Next month, GAIA Global Health's supporters will gather at the top of San Francisco's Salesforce Tower to celebrate a quarter-century of impact in the African country of Malawi, where AIDS-related deaths have fallen by 81% overall – over 91% among children. New infections – the key metric providing hope for an AIDS-free future – have fallen even more.

At the same time, GAIA's work has branched into other treatable but potentially deadly diseases like malaria, pneumonia and diarrheal disease among children with notable impact on all fronts. However, though our "silver" anniversary celebration will be a proud and joyous one, it will be tempered by real fear over a new tsunami of suffering just ahead.

The first waves of that unnecessary pain have already reached the shore. Though Secretary of State Marco Rubio has declared that foreign aid cuts have caused zero deaths since the Trump administration took over, the data suggests otherwise. The layered impact of slashed budgets, rescissions, agreement cancellations and dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development averages what amounts to scores of deaths every hour.

The changes are reversing decades of progress. According to "The Impact Metrics Dashboard" hosted online by Boston University, Rubio is mistaken, with an estimation of more than 419,000 resultant deaths at the time of this writing. Not surprisingly, children have been hardest hit, with more than 283,000 unnecessary estimated deaths due to malnutrition, pneumonia, diarrhea, and malaria alone.

Perhaps Rubio is making the point that his actions are not killing these children, but rather that the U.S. is no longer saving them. That semantic distinction is lost on those of us who have watched children suffer from preventable or treatable illnesses. When you stop treating babies for malaria at less than \$1 per dose, it feels like killing to me.

GAIA lost one-third of its budget when USAID shut down, funding that was meant to support hundreds of young women in nursing schools and more. But that was only the first-order financial impact. When our fully obligated funding was terminated, suddenly a budget hole was punched that reached well beyond that single program.

Just as suddenly, GAIA's partners providing complementary clinical services at our mobile clinics were cutting back their programs (due to their own funding cuts), leaving GAIA to fill in the void (or let clients simply go without). Most concerning, GAIA's critical partners within Malawi's resource-constrained Ministry of Health started scrambling their own budgets as leaks started to spring.

All of these stresses made the need for GAIA's services greater than ever, while our largest funding stream ran dry.

The good news for GAIA and Malawi is that we enjoy enormous support from donors in the U.S., especially the Bay Area, and many have stepped up their giving in response to the cuts. This generosity has allowed us to keep our commitments to all the nursing students and fellows placed at risk, and kept GAIA Malawi's infrastructure functioning while we work with local partners – including local governments – to rework the long-term plan. It's exhausting to constantly do more with less, but Rankin and Wilson didn't launch GAIA to be timid.

When we gather in San Francisco next month, we will celebrate our audacious founders as well as the devoted philanthropists that have built, sustained, and rescued our programs over the past quarter century. At the same time, I imagine that many of us will quietly shake our fists at the political winds that conspire to reverse Malawi's progress.

And the next day, we'll get back to work saving lives.

*Todd Schafer is executive director of GAIA Global Health. Learn more about the 25th anniversary event at [bit.ly/3H5B0pS](https://bit.ly/3H5B0pS).*