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From its Providence HQ, Plan International aids the globe. Then USAID cuts came.



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Key Points

- Plan International received approximately \$25 million a year from USAID for programs in places like Guatemala, Nepal and Ethiopia.
- A dozen years ago, Plan shifted their main global focus to the needs of girls, who are often left behind in developing countries.
- Plan had a major initiative in Nepal with a \$20 million USAID grant over four years to track a million kids into education and skills training, which can protect girls from child marriage.

Shanna Marzilli was in her office in Providence's Foundry building when she began to get worrisome messages from the federal government – they were pausing [USAID programs](#) immediately.

As president of [Plan International](#), a global humanitarian group headquartered here, she knew she could be a target.

“Plan,” as it’s called, is mostly under the radar locally but has been a major force for 90 years, with a \$1 billion annual budget helping tens of millions of needy souls in over 50 nations. It’s an underappreciated Rhode Island-based icon with a worldwide footprint.

Shanna knew that Plan gets \$25 million a year from USAID for programs in places like Guatemala, Nepal and Ethiopia. Now, she was told, those were being halted. Indeed, Shanna checked Plan’s Bank of America account and saw that expected USAID money was no longer coming through.

Shanna, 51, has headed Plan’s USA headquarters in Providence for 11 years. Around 35 people work here in town, but the agency’s global staff numbers an astonishing 6,000. Most are village locals, which is part of Plan’s mission, employing people where they live.

One of Shanna's biggest concerns at the USAID news was a Plan project in Ethiopia helping [refugees in the Tigray province](#) displaced by an ugly war the world mostly ignored.

Plan, she knew, had a warehouse there stocked with food and medicine for exiles in nearby camps. But the D.C. directives were clear – even that effort had to be paused. Shanna saw it as a tragedy – the supplies had already been purchased and were sitting there.

They had to fight this.

She and her staff tried to reach USAID folks they knew in Washington but found that many had already been laid off. So they contacted Rhode Island's congressional delegation, as well as USAID staffers in Ethiopia. Finally, after days of appeals, they got good news on Feb. 12 – their Ethiopia warehouse, deemed a lifesaving mission, received a waiver to get back to work.

But two weeks later, Shanna was in her North Kingstown home when Plan's general counsel,

James Peters, called to say that Washington had reversed course – the Ethiopia project was now being terminated. "It was shocking and sad," Shanna told me.

They had no choice but to shut the warehouse doors.

But Shanna and her staff kept pushing. The Tigray situation remains a crisis. There had to be a way.

I'll get to the warehouse project's current status in a moment, but first, some background.

Although I have not been in touch with Plan in years, I have long been a fan of the group.

My first foreign trip as a journalist was to Africa during a 1980s famine, and Plan's Rhode Island staff, then in Warwick, helped point me to stories. I ended up spending a day in Sudan with a Plan staffer named Jim Geenen who was coaxing a dry field to grow crops to help people there survive. I remember Jim longing for two things – a cold beer in a Muslim country where alcohol was banned, and seeing the desert bloom.

At one point, my own family also sponsored a young African girl named Fariel through a Plan program, our monthly payments supporting her and her family. Fariel occasionally wrote us letters.

That program – now at \$39 a month – is still a big part of Plan, and Shanna herself supports one of 41,000 sponsored kids, in her case a young girl in Guatemala. What makes the sponsor program



Shanna Marzilli, president and CEO of Plan International USA, takes a photo with a Guatemalan girl she sponsors through the humanitarian group. *Provided by Shanna Marzilli*

effective is that the monthly donations support community projects like schools and health centers that benefit the kids – and their villages – more broadly than direct payments to families.

A dozen years ago, Plan shifted their main global focus to the needs of girls, who are often left behind in developing countries.

When I asked for examples, Shanna said there are hundreds of millions of girls left out of schooling. Culturally, said Shanna, many girls in poverty are tracked instead toward household chores like gathering water. There's also a belief that girls should focus on being taken care of through marriage instead of their own careers.

Another barrier, said Shanna, is that schools are far from many villages. So, for example, in Zimbabwe, Plan created a dorm for girls at a school site, including staff for health support and job training.

Shanna was recently in Guatemala to see similar Plan programs, including one encouraging older females to go back to classes. One 53-year-old mother there told Shanna, "How can I expect my children to do better if they don't see me finish school?"

On that trip, Shanna also met her own sponsored child, 6-year-old Liliana. Shanna's \$39 monthly payments to her go in part to a Plan agricultural program helping Liliana's family improve their farm yields.

Chatting with Shanna was a reminder to me of how complex it is to help folks in developing countries out of poverty. For example, countless kids are in villages lacking electricity, preventing them from doing homework at night. So Plan has projects to address that, too.



Shanna Marzilli, president and CEO of Plan International USA, gathers with children for a photo during a trip to Guatemala. *Provided by Shanna Marzilli*

Plan also has a big corporate program with Kimberly Clark, stocking schools in 10 countries with feminine hygiene products – the lack of them is another reason girls don't go to school and are left behind.

Shanna told me about a Guatemala program called “Connections to Success” offering skill training and \$100 to \$500 in seed money to younger folks between ages 16 and 21 to start careers. One woman created a seamstress business while another opened a convenience store in a village.

Those opportunities, said Shanna, give people in that region a path to stay in their communities instead of trying to migrate to Mexico or America.

That Guatemala program, said Shanna, will survive because it's funded by private donors.

But others have been shut down by the USAID cuts. One example: Plan had a major initiative in Nepal with a \$20 million USAID grant over four years to track a million kids into education and skills training, which can protect girls from child marriage. That program, said Shanna, was terminated.

With its \$1 billion budget and strong donor base, Plan will remain a global humanitarian force. But of its 13 projects supported by USAID, said Shanna, 12 have now been closed, including one protecting girls in Burkina Faso from being trafficked and another offering child daycare to 45,000 women factory workers in Ethiopia to help them keep their jobs.

And the 13th?

That would be the warehouse in Tigray.

Shanna and her team kept up appeals for that one. It finally worked. A week ago, they were told the warehouse project was “unterminated,” a rare case of a USAID project continuing.

The victory reminded Shanna of an essential philosophy for those in the humanitarian business: With so many barriers, you have to be an optimist.

But from her office in Providence, Plan International's Shanna Marzilli now has one more barrier she didn't expect.

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