



# Strengthening Access to Mental Health Services in Sierra Leone

## BACKGROUND

Every person infected with Ebola virus disease (EVD) during the 2014–2016 outbreak in West Africa was traumatized in one way or another by this life-threatening, acute illness. They were told there was an extremely high mortality rate and no treatment to cure this disease. Those admitted to treatment units were isolated from their communities, cared for by people they did not know and whose faces they could not see, while often witnessing the deaths of family and friends.

After discharge, many EVD survivors experienced stigma and isolation, as well as longer-term health issues that impeded their ability to return to their livelihoods. In the wake of these experiences, many survivors manifested mental health issues with episodes of grief, stress, depression, anxiety, and difficulty sleeping, similar to what was seen during Sierra Leone's post-conflict period. It is estimated that more than 700,000 people are affected by severe mental health problems in Sierra Leone<sup>1</sup>. From community to tertiary-level care providers, there was a need to raise awareness of mental health issues that EVD survivors might face, as well as ensuring that specialized care was available to those in need.

Throughout Sierra Leone there is a considerable resource gap for diagnosing and treating mental health conditions; so the majority of those in need are unable to access appropriate care. The country's mental health workforce consists of two psychiatrists and 20 mental health nurses (MHN) who have been struggling to get official recognition and accreditation by the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MOHS). Poor overall understanding of mental health conditions and limited mental health training and education in the health workforce has resulted in high levels of stigma toward mental health patients and services.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Advancing Partners & Communities (Advancing Partners) project, through the Strengthening Health Services Post-Ebola project, with focus on Ebola survivors (the Ebola Transmission Prevention & Survivor Services Program), is working in coordination with the MOHS, the World Health Organization (WHO), King's Sierra Leone Partnership (KSLP), and the War Trauma Foundation to build capacity of the overall public health system to provide quality evidence-based mental health services at every level of care, in a compassionate and nondiscriminatory manner. This effort is a part of the project's mandate to improve the health and well-being of EVD survivors at all levels of the health system, while addressing stigma associated with mental health EVD status and supporting community reintegration.

1 World Health Organization, *WHO proMIND: profiles on mental health in development: Sierra Leone*, 2012. [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/policy/country/sierra\\_leone\\_country\\_summary\\_2012.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/policy/country/sierra_leone_country_summary_2012.pdf)

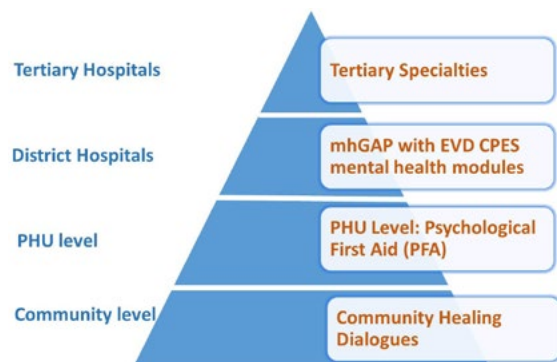


## INTERVENTION

At the community level, the project works within the six USAID priority districts (Bombali, Kailahun, Kenema, Port Loko, Western Area Rural, and Western Area Urban), implementing Community Healing Dialogues, which help communities identify resources and coping mechanisms and provide mutual support for psychosocial problems. Communities with the highest numbers of EVD survivors are the primary target for this intervention. The dialogues are facilitated by trained community health officers (CHOs) and social workers. They engage 15 to 18 community members, who meet once a week to discuss how to promote mental health, talk about social issues in their communities, and work toward community resilience.

At the primary health care level, the project has worked in collaboration with the WHO and the War Trauma Foundation to train health care workers (HCWs) at Peripheral Health Units (PHUs) in psychological first aid. The training has enabled them to recognize distress symptoms in themselves and in their colleagues, and to better recognize signs of distress among patients and refer them to the district MHNs.

**Figure 1. Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Framework – Sierra Leone Ministry of Health and Sanitation and World Health Organization**



To complement the support provided to HCWs working at the PHU level, the project is targeting higher-level cadres, enabling them to provide more specialized mental health services across the country. Advancing Partners has begun training MHNs, CHOs, and medical doctors through the mental health gap action program (mhGAP) in collaboration with KSLP and WHO. The mhGAP, which was developed by WHO, supports mid- and higher-level HCWs to provide more specialized mental health services by using simple procedures to assess clients for mental

disorders, determine diagnosis, and identify possible treatment options. Considering the post-Ebola context, the project has collaborated with the MOHS, WHO, and KSLP to develop a Sierra Leone-specific module for mhGAP training, which addresses particular issues facing individuals and communities responding to conflict and epidemics.

At the district- and tertiary-level hospitals, the project provides MHNs with regular, continuous professional development training and mentorship sessions to ensure quality standards for the services provided at hospital mental health clinics and in community outreach initiatives promoted by the project. The project is supporting mental health district clinics within the hospitals and is improving quality of services by revising the monitoring tools used by MHNs to collect data on mental health patients.



*Mental health nurse lead at Connaught Hospital providing mentorship to a team of mental health nurses.*

At the national level, the project collaborates with the MOHS and WHO to strengthen the national mental health policy framework to ensure that increased access to quality mental health services is integrated into all levels of care. In order to do so, the project has engaged with the Nursing and Midwifery Board to support the official recognition and accreditation for MHNs. The project is working toward ensuring greater access to specialized care in the long term through the development of a Mental Health Diploma at College of Medicines and Allied Health Sciences (COMAHS).

## RESULTS

Since its inception, the project has achieved considerable results aiming at improving access to various mental health services at community, primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of care.

So far, at the community level, Advancing Partners has reached **680 people in 30 communities** across the six priority districts through Community Healing Dialogues.

As part of the work at the primary health care level, the project has reached over **350 healthcare workers** working in **125 PHUs** in the six priority districts with psychological first aid training.

At the district level, the project has contributed to the creation of a national mental health network and deployment of mental health nurses to every district, establishing mental health clinics in every government hospital. Furthermore, the **20 mental health nurses** regularly receive training through an intensive program of mentoring, supervision, and continuous professional development sessions.

*"As mental health nurses who have received training from JSI and its partners in psychological first aid, we were able to pick out victims that needed support the most. We listened to their stories and tried to stabilize their mental state by counselling them."*

Frances Kemokai,  
Moyamba District Mental Health Nurse

The project has successfully supported the MOHS in developing and drafting the **National Mental Health Policy** and a five-year strategic plan for Sierra Leone (2016-2021)<sup>2</sup>.

To support long-term capacity building and institutionalization of USAID capacity building efforts, the project has advanced the **accreditation of MHNs** as a specialized cadre, building the foundation for the establishment of a Mental Health Diploma at COMAHS.

The results achieved thus far are helping to strengthen the population's resilience and the health system's capacities

to identify, prevent, and adequately respond to mental health problems. This was demonstrated by the rapid and effective involvement of mental health nurses in providing support to communities affected by the recent mudslide disaster that occurred in Freetown in August 2017.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Community Healing Dialogues have **triggered community decisions** to initiate savings and loans programs as a way to support community resilience
- ✓ Mental health nurses nationwide have provided over **4,000 mental health consultations** to general population and delivered mental health services to **86 EVD survivors**
- ✓ **Mental health nurses are invaluable in emergencies**; they played a major role in the Freetown mudslide response, proving to be a key resource for counselling, prevention and treatment of MH disorders.

<sup>2</sup> The documents are awaiting final validation by the MOHS.

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This publication was produced by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc., through Advancing Partners & Communities, a cooperative agreement funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development under Agreement No. AID-OAA-A-12-00047, beginning October 1, 2012. The authors' views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

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