

# Development of Mental Health Services in Liberia

THE  
CARTER CENTER



Many Liberians witnessed their family and friends brutally killed or raped during Liberia's more than 13 years of devastating civil war, which ended in 2003. With only one practicing psychiatrist in the country and limited access to psychiatric medicines, the psychological impact of the conflict continues to cause tremendous suffering. For example, approximately 40 percent of Liberia's 3.4 million people experience post-traumatic stress disorder.

At the invitation of the Liberian Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, The Carter Center is working to help the country build a sustainable mental health system that can address this void.

Compounding the problem are the stigma and misconceptions around mental illnesses that perpetuate suffering. Some patients, families, and health workers without mental health training perceive mental illnesses as a punishment for bad behavior and epilepsy as a contagious disease. Because of misunderstandings about mental illnesses and lack of services, families and communities may isolate or restrain people with mental illness or resort to potentially harmful practices that worsen distress. Due to stigma, lack of mental health training, and low supplies of essential medications, most individuals with mental illness and their families struggle throughout their lives.

## Program Goals

Working with the Liberian government, the Carter Center's Mental Health Program has three main objectives to be completed by 2015:

1. Train a sustainable and credentialed workforce of mental health clinicians, including 150 specialized nurses and physician assistants and 300 other mental health professionals, such as community mental

health workers. Existing nursing schools host training programs to build the nation's capacity for health education. After graduation, nurses and physician assistants have the opportunity to receive national credentialing as specialists in mental health, and graduates of the program work within the primary health care system to provide mental health services to the population.

2. Assist the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in establishing and implementing its National Mental Health Policy, including dramatically increasing coverage to reach 70 percent of the population.

3. Create anti-stigma campaigns nationwide to improve public understanding of mental illnesses. Additionally, the program is helping to establish advocacy groups and educational programs to foster family and community support.

## Mental Health and Liberia

- Approximately 50 to 70 percent of women and girls were sexually assaulted during the civil war.
- Among ex-combatants:
  - 44 percent have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder
  - 40 percent have symptoms of major depression
  - 11 percent have contemplated suicide
- Even the most serious mental illnesses can be effectively and affordably treated in Liberia and elsewhere throughout the world.
- A partnership between the Liberian government and The Carter Center aims to dramatically improve access to mental health care services in the country.

## Carter Center Partners

The Carter Center is working with many organizations in Liberia and in the United States on this initiative.

**Liberian government and professional organizations:** Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, Ministry of Gender and Development, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Information Culture and Tourism, Council of Churches, Liberian Nursing Board, Liberian Physician Assistant Association, and Liberian academic and service institutions

**Nongovernmental organizations:** John Snow Inc., the U.S. Peace Corps, Medecins du Monde, Tiyatien Health, Emory University, Denver University, Georgia Institute of Technology, Medical University of South Carolina, AIFO Liberia, National Union of Organizations of the Disabled, Sightsavers International and Handicap International, Makerere University School of Public Health, TPO Uganda, and TPO Nepal

Brandon Korht



Carter Center consultants meet with a group of Liberians to discuss the need for mental health care in the country.

# DEVELOPMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN LIBERIA

## Frequently Asked Questions

### ***How did the Carter Center's Mental Health Program decide to get involved?***

Building on nearly two decades of Carter Center efforts to foster peace and democracy in Liberia, the Carter Center's Mental Health Program launched a five-year initiative in 2010 to help the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare create a sustainable mental health system that will address a broad range of mental health conditions. The Carter Center is the only nongovernmental organization working to support the ministry's long-term goals for improving public health in Liberia.

The educational model is based on the Carter Center's Ethiopia Public Health Training Initiative, which developed culturally relevant educational materials to train a workforce of more than 26,000 health professionals to address the void of rural health care in Ethiopia.

### ***How is The Carter Center helping to increase the number of trained mental health professionals in Liberia?***

Approximately 150 clinicians are being trained in semester-long sessions through Liberian partner universities and clinical sites. These trainees will have the chance to receive national credentials and licensing. There is no cost to participate in the course, and learning materials are provided for free. The materials used in the course were developed by the Carter Center's

Mental Health Program in collaboration with Liberian nurses, physician assistants, health instructors, and Ministry of Health staff to ensure training reflects Liberian mental health needs. These materials also were reviewed by international teaching and mental health experts.

### ***How is this program making a difference?***

Less than one percent of Liberians have access to mental health services, yet nearly 40 percent are believed to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder due to their experiences during a brutal civil war. Based on nearly two decades of trusted partnership with the Liberian government on peace and democracy efforts, the Liberian government invited The Carter Center to help implement its National Mental Health Policy and expand care to 70 percent of Liberians, reducing disability and suffering from mental illnesses and building a stronger society.

### ***How will this program be sustained?***

The Carter Center's Mental Health Program is working closely with the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare to ensure future sustainability of mental health services and develop permanent training and educational systems for future mental health workers. Nursing and physician assistant educators are included as students in the classes to help ensure sustainability when the program eventually is handed over to the Liberian government. The program also strives to integrate mental health services into the

primary health care system of Liberia. Ongoing periodic evaluation of the entire initiative will focus on program performance and clinical outcomes.



Deborah Hakes

***Liberia's population is 3.4 million people, but formal care for mental illnesses is severely limited with only one practicing psychiatrist in the country.***

The Carter Center's Mental Health Program was founded in 1991 by former U.S. First Lady Rosalynn Carter. The Mental Health Program works to promote awareness about mental health issues, reduce stigma and discrimination against those with mental illnesses, and achieve greater parity for mental health. For more information, please visit [www.cartercenter.org](http://www.cartercenter.org).



Deborah Hakes

***Many Liberians face post-traumatic stress disorder following years of civil war. Many Liberians were displaced from their homes by the war and lived in refugee camps for long periods of time, including this young girl.***



THE CARTER CENTER  
MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

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