Development of Mental Health Services in Liberia

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.

Carter Center Partners

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


Nongovernmental organizations: John Snow Inc., the U.S. Peace Corps, Medicins 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

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