



REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH POLICY



MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELFARE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The creation of a National Mental Health policy is critical to the development of Liberia's health system. Mental health is an integral component to any efficient, well-functioning structure of care. It is not only for the chronically mentally ill – who often represent a small part of a population – but for the many people who suffer from common mental diseases.

The treatment and prevention of mental health problems is of paramount importance in the Liberian context. Decades of a vicious civil war wrought devastating consequences. Many people witnessed terrible acts of violence, most experienced tremendous loss and almost all were displaced at least once. The psychological impact of this period is still unknown. Research from other post-conflict areas, however, has shown high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression in similarly affected populations. In addition to the lingering effects of the war, Liberian communities are beset by increasing rates of substance abuse, and the difficulties associated with widespread and chronic poverty.

The current mental health system has so far been unable to cope with these varied psychological and psychosocial issues. Unless appropriately managed, these problems will continue to undermine the recovery and development of the country.

The goal of this policy is therefore to address the mental health needs of all Liberians through high quality, culturally appropriate, evidence-based, equitable and cost-effective care. These core components along with accessibility, human rights, efficiency and sustainability, and community involvement and participation, are the principles and values from which this policy was developed.

Foundations of the policy

This policy mandates that mental health be integrated into the primary health system, and that consistent with the Basic Health Package, services be confidential and free of cost. A decentralized approach in which mental health treatment is available at the local health clinics and health centers, county hospitals and tertiary facilities will improve the quality of life for all patients and families. It will ensure that people have access to treatment as close to their home as possible. It will enable health workers to more readily identify, and monitor and manage mental health disorders. It will allow those with both physical and mental health related needs to be treated in a seamless and comprehensive manner. It will increase educational opportunities about mental health, and help to reduce the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness. It will also minimize the cost of seeking specialized care at distant mental health facilities and maximize resources by having local providers treat common mental diseases. The following are the features of this new system:

- Highly trained, multi-disciplinary County Mental Health Teams that will provide high quality mental health care.
- Mental health outpatient teams at the local health clinics and health centers that will offer a range of community-based outpatient mental health services.
- Inpatient care in county hospitals Wellness Units, which will be for short-term

psychiatric admissions. These units will allow for acute, close-to-home care without requiring institutionalization.

- Restoration of a mental health inpatient facility at the country's general hospital. This will compensate for the eventual closing of the existing mental health institution where patients requiring long-term care are currently treated.
- Efforts for the prevention of mental illness.

This policy also recognizes that additional services must be implemented for certain vulnerable groups that are at particular risk for developing mental health related problems. The policy has focused on three such populations: children and adolescents, victims of sexual and gender-based violence, and the seriously mentally ill.

- Services for children will include mental health promotion and education, school-based mental health, guidelines for community-based and inpatient care, and recommendations for specialized populations.
- Services for victims of rape as well as for perpetrators of sexual and gender based violence will consist of specialized medical care from health workers with relevant training, support through trauma and empowerment based initiatives, and prevention strategies, such as Codes of Conduct, school safety zones and a Zero Tolerance policy.
- Treatment for the severely mentally ill will be, when possible, community-based. It will seek to reduce or eliminate symptoms, maximize quality of life and adaptive functioning, promote and maintain recovery from the debilitating effects of the illness, and include education for patients and families.

The lack of skilled mental health professionals in Liberia cannot be overstated. The services outlined in this policy will be ineffective and futile unless providers can accurately diagnose, evaluate and treat mental disorders, and appropriately respond to the psychological and psychosocial needs of the population. Human resource development is thus imperative to the success of this integrated system. The short-term goal will be to train the existing health work force in basic competencies and in the skills necessary for mental health care. The long-term goal will be to increase the number of highly qualified mental health workers. The following points, among others, will help accomplish these objectives:

- The MOHSW will create educational and training opportunities for psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric physician assistants, master-level psychiatric nurses and clinical social workers. These specialized professionals will ultimately assume the care for the mentally ill from non-specialized health providers.
- The MOHSW will produce mental health procedural guidelines and standardized curriculums for each profession.
- The MOHSW will explicitly define competencies, and the responsibility and authority of each profession as they relate to mental health care.
- The MOHSW will create relevant credentialing and licensing systems, and an accreditation process for organizations and institutions involved in mental health training programs.
- The MOHSW will extensively train both general health and mental health workers. It will educate professionals about the nature and treatment of mental health related issues.

This will help reduce stigma and discrimination towards mental health patients.

A Liberian Center of Excellence – a partnership of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, academic institutions, professional boards, and relevant national and international groups – will buttress and help sustain the mental health workforce. The Center of Excellence will serve as the major repository for cultural- and evidence-based knowledge and practices in mental health treatment. It will offer expert advice, assist in the implementation and development of the policy, and help with training and education.

To ensure quality and achieve intended outcomes, the Ministry will fulfill the points listed below:

- The MOHSW will allocate specific funding for the implementation of policy initiatives.
- The MOHSW will have a National Mental Health Coordinator guide, direct and supervise the overall development of mental health programs through a Mental Health Unit within the Ministry.
- The MOHSW will create a monitoring and evaluation system to regulate care.
- The MOHSW will define mental health indicators to be collected and analyzed, and use the results to inform future programming decisions.
- The MOHSW will encourage mental health research, and adopt international research standards to guarantee ethical conduct.
- The MOHSW will revise and update the essential list of psychiatric drugs, and routinely review which health workers can prescribe these medications.
- The MOHSW will launch and support campaigns to educate Liberians about the causes and treatments of mental diseases.
- The MOHSW will utilize existing resources and coordinate these efforts so not to establish parallel structures of care.
- The MOHSW will collaborate with other Ministry programs.
- The MOHSW will work with Professional Boards to develop competencies and ensure the quality of providers and training programs.
- The MOHSW will partner with Non-Governmental Organizations and traditional healers.

The measures outlined in this policy will have substantial benefits for Liberia. They reflect the needs and priorities of the population, and will significantly improve the well-being of all citizens. They are also critical to building the social capital of the country – mental health is not an isolated discipline, but deeply intertwined with Liberia’s socio-economic standing.

The development of this policy represents a momentous first step. The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare has shown strong leadership and commitment to mental health – an area that more than 40% of countries in the world fail to address in formal policies and plans. Furthermore, extensive consultation and input from national and international stakeholders has led to supportive and careful planning for a viable system that can successfully operate within the confines of Liberia’s resources. This unified effort is laudable. It will help create a mental health system that cannot only reduce the burden of mental disease, but enable the country to realize its overall goals as a post-conflict nation.