

Beyond Ebola

Aid focuses on governmental institutions

By Gregory F. Maggio, political chief, U.S. Mission in Freetown

The United States and Sierra Leone have a long history, stretching back to the American Revolution when the British repatriated hundreds of freed slaves from North America to Freetown, and the U.S. Supreme Court's Amistad decision in 1839 to liberate 53 Sierra Leoneans who had been illegally enslaved. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, American missionaries helped develop the country's educational infrastructure, establishing schools in Freetown and elsewhere.

Sierra Leone, however, has confronted substantial hardships during its history, including a brutal 1991–2002 civil war. The most recent hardship was the Ebola virus epidemic of 2014, which devastated the health care system, shocked the national consciousness and reversed the country's promising economic and political gains. By the epidemic's end in 2015, the disease had infected more than 12,000 individuals, affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of persons and threatened the country's existence.

The U.S. Mission in Sierra Leone played a critical role in the Ebola response effort and continues to aid the country's recovery, having provided more than \$600 million for the response and recovery efforts. Though the crisis has ended, the U.S. Mission in Sierra Leone is continuing to assist the host nation with improving all of its governmental institutions, not just those offering health care. Among U.S. government-funded initiatives focused on Ebola survivors is a program implemented by the U.S.-based NGO Partners in Health (PIH). Headquartered at the government hospital in Port Loko, which suffered a particularly high incidence of Ebola cases, the program employs Ebola survivors for the hospital's health care and community outreach activities. At the hospital in April, 10 young survivors met with U.S. Mission personnel to tell of experiencing continued joint pain and vision impairment. They also spoke of the social discrimination and rejection from their families they experienced when returning home following their recovery from the disease. The survivors said that, by offering opportunities to attain respectable jobs and earn income, the PIH program changed public perceptions of the survivors as outcasts and raised their community standing. This accelerated their social reintegration and countered the stigmatization of Ebola survivors elsewhere.

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U.S. Federal Judges Beryl Howell, left, and Ricardo Hinojosa, right, review Freetown's Law Courts library with Sierra Leone Supreme Court Justice Nicholas Browne-Marke, center, as part of the American judges' technical assistance visit to the Promoting Transparency in Sierra Leone's Judiciary project. Photo by Gregory Maggio

One survivor spoke of being "frowned upon by my community after I recovered." His wife ran away, and he was lonely and faced vision and hearing problems, too, he said. "But thank God today I am serving my colleagues at the Port Loko Hospital," he added, referring to the PIH program.

Likewise, the Ambassador's Special Self-Help Program (SSH) provided small grants to make a difference in Ebola-affected communities. At Makambo village near Bo, the Ebola virus killed 30

persons, devastating the social and economic fabric. An SSH grant there provided 150 persons, including survivors, widows and orphans with goats, livestock and seeds for planting. It also funded agricultural training to help those affected to restart their lives with good nutrition and improve their economic circumstances. One beneficiary of the SSH grant in Makambo said it led to distribution of goats to 30 women, 10 of them Ebola survivors. "Some of these goats are pregnant and hopefully there will be many baby goats playing in the yards," he continued. "Village women are hoping, they are praying, to earn money from selling the goats." Another example of the mission's aid is that provided by the U.S. World Fish program, which is funded by the mission's USAID office. WorldFish has established 20 agriculture projects in communities where Ebola undermined the local economy, projects that involve training 500 farmers to operate rice and food-fish ponds. In the Tonkolili District, where childhood malnutrition is a serious problem, 950 households are involved. Another mission program, one focused on empowering rural women, is serving 180 low-income women in Ebola affected areas of the Port Loko District. The project aims to raise their economic status and help them play a greater role in their communities through designing and implementing agricultural and other micro projects. The women also get training in economics, leadership and conflict resolution. At the project's February launch event, Ambassador John Hoover said women's empowerment "is not just a matter of fairness, but also a means for ensuring that all of society benefits, in terms of peace, stability and prosperity.

The ambassador added that women should not be afraid but should be empowered, and men should not be afraid to empower women.

More broadly, the mission's efforts to assist with the postEbola recovery focus on socioeconomic and political needs. Corruption, lack of transparency, the marginalization of women and weak institutions all affected Sierra Leone's ability to combat Ebola, as did the public's suspicion of government institutions. Ebola survivors spoke of a lack of confidence in the public health care system and even a fear of the medications prescribed by health care providers. One survivor—a PIH program beneficiary—said there was a popular public misperception that, "If you go to a hospital, you will die." Those problems make clear the need for the nation's citizens to have increased trust in all public institutions, not just hospitals. Therefore, the U.S. Mission is involved in such programs as Access Sierra Leone, which has initiated community dialogues on corruption, created citizen scorecards for monitoring the judiciary and helped journalists publicize and combat corruption. The project also supports citizen demands for greater government accountability and fosters greater community awareness of women's rights, reducing gender-based violence. Access Sierra Leone, which is implemented by the United Nations Development Program, is funded by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and uses the U.S. Mission in an advisory role. The U.S. Mission also participates in the Promoting Transparency in

Sierra Leone's Judiciary project, which is developing standardized bail and sentencing guidelines, and seeking greater accountability in the justice sector and to alleviate prison overcrowding. The mission is a member of the project's working group, as are representatives of the host nation's judicial and law enforcement institutions and representatives of prisoners' rights and other human rights groups.

To promote an improved judiciary, the mission in March brought two U.S. federal judges, Beryl Howell and Ricardo Hinojosa, to Sierra Leone to share best practices on bail and sentencing with the working group. The jurists joined the group's national consultations in 11 locations across the nation to speak about the project and hear the public's recommendations on bail and sentencing

parameters for specific crimes. The judges' visit emphasized the mission's commitment to Sierra Leone and showed how that commitment extends beyond the post-Ebola recovery to help the host nation improve its judicial and other governance institutions.

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