

Title "Empowering County Health Officers: Strengthening Local Health System Leadership through Structured Orientation and On-the-Job Training"

Birhanu Getahun¹, Jethro Zawolo¹, Lauretta Nagbe¹, Gaspar Mbita¹, Lorraine Cooper², Pius A. Essandoh¹, Uwem Inyang³, Yah Zolia³, Shelly A. Wright³

¹Jhpiego, Liberia, ²Ministry of Health, Liberia, ³USAID, Liberia



HEALTH SYSTEMS
STRENGTHENING
ACCELERATOR

Context

- Limited leadership and management capacity among subnational health managers poses a significant barrier to the effective and efficient implementation of health services at the local level in Liberia. This challenge is particularly pronounced when newly assigned County Health Officers (CHOs) lack the necessary knowledge and hands-on experience in management.
- A survey conducted among county health officers revealed several areas of deficiency, including a lack of familiarity with ministry policies, guidelines, and protocols, limited managerial and leadership experience, inadequate knowledge in public finance management, limited experience in staff and supply chain management, and a lack of skills in using data for decision-making.
- Furthermore, there was no formal orientation mechanism in place for CHOs when they assumed their roles as county health officers under the Ministry of Health (MOH).

Activity Description

- To address these issues, the USAID/STAIIP Activity organized a three-day in-person CHO orientation workshop in response to the MOH's request for strengthening CHO leadership and management capacities. The workshop, held in Monrovia from March 29-31, 2021, covered various topics based on the survey findings, including leadership modules, public financial management, supply chain management, and data utilization for informed decision-making.
- During the workshop, CHOs had the opportunity to engage with donors such as USAID, UNFPA, GIZ, the Chinese Embassy, and WHO to discuss previous and upcoming investments in the health sector. The orientation concluded with CHOs identifying mandatory online courses and developing individualized learning plans, which would be complemented by a STAIIP-moderated Community of Practice (CoP) and a mentoring program. The goal was to complete these activities and achieve certification by July 31, 2021.
- To support the CHOs in their ongoing learning, STAIIP provided a monthly internet package to facilitate access to online mandatory courses and the courses selected for their individualized learning plans.

Activity Impact

The comprehensive approach of in-person orientation, mandatory online courses, and moderated community of practice has yielded significant positive outcomes for the CHOs:

- **Improved Leadership Capacity:** The orientation and training sessions have enhanced the CHOs' leadership capacity, enabling them to excel in co-creating activities with partners, providing effective oversight and monitoring, and ensuring efficient project implementation in their respective counties. They have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate complex health systems and effectively manage their teams.
- **Enhanced Efficiency and Effectiveness:** With their improved leadership capacity, the CHOs have streamlined processes, made informed decisions, and achieved greater efficiency and effectiveness in project implementation.
- **Delegation and Empowerment:** Notably, the CHOs have shown improved ability to delegate tasks and empower their staff. They recognize the importance of building a competent and motivated workforce within their counties. By effectively delegating responsibilities and empowering their team members, the CHOs have fostered a supportive and productive work environment. This approach boosts staff morale and enables the CHOs to focus on higher-level strategic activities, maximizing their impact.
- Overall, the combination of in-person orientation, mandatory online courses, and moderated community of practice has significantly enhanced the leadership capacity of the CHOs. Their improved skills in project oversight, task delegation, and staff empowerment have resulted in more efficient and effective implementation of health initiatives in their counties.

Evidence

Dr. John Doedeh, the CHO for Lofa County, expressed his appreciation for the orientation, which served as his first comprehensive training in a leadership role. Despite his limited prior experience, he acknowledged the valuable knowledge and support provided by STAIIP, USAID, and partners, enabling him to excel in his role.



Facilitators

The success of this approach was facilitated by several key factors:

- **Demand-Driven Intervention:** The MOH's request for support highlighted the existing gap and ensured that the approach was tailored to address specific subnational needs.
- **Supportive Donor:** USAID provided crucial financial and technical support throughout the process, significantly contributing to the intervention's success.
- **Strong Collaboration:** Effective collaboration among the Ministry of Health, donors, STAIIP, and other stakeholders created an enabling environment for implementation.
- **Expertise in Leadership and Management:** Jhpiego's experience in capacity building for leadership and management played a significant role in developing and delivering effective training content.
- **Experienced Facilitators:** Knowledgeable facilitators from the Ministry of Health provided valuable insights and guidance during the in-person orientation, ensuring high-quality training aligned with the County Health Officers' specific needs.
- **Commitment of County Health Officers:** The active participation and dedication of the County Health Officers were vital to the approach's success, as demonstrated by their completion of mandatory courses and application of newfound knowledge.

Challenges

- To accommodate the busy schedules of County Health Officers (CHOs), a strategic decision was made to introduce self-paced modules after the orientation. This allows CHOs to learn at their own pace and convenience, ensuring they can balance their professional responsibilities while gaining the necessary knowledge and skills.
- Additionally, challenges with internet connectivity, particularly in the South-East counties, hindered access to online resources and training materials. To overcome this obstacle, proactive measures were taken to explore alternative solutions and provide additional support. The aim was to ensure equitable access to training resources, enabling all CHOs to benefit fully from the program regardless of their location.

Lessons Learned

- The implementation of this activity provided valuable lessons, including:
- Conflicting and busy schedules of CHOs posed challenges for self-paced learning. However, the availability of the modules allowed CHOs to fit the sessions into their schedules and complete them at a suitable time.
- Self-directed or paced learning offers opportunities for local leaders with demanding schedules to enhance their capacity and skills.
- The intervention has significantly improved the leadership capacity of CHOs, enabling them to effectively engage in functions such as co-creating activities with partners, fostering partnerships, and providing oversight and monitoring in their respective counties.
- It is recommended to institutionalize this approach by establishing MOH ownership to ensure continuous orientation of CHOs in their core duties.



BILL & MELINDA
GATES foundation