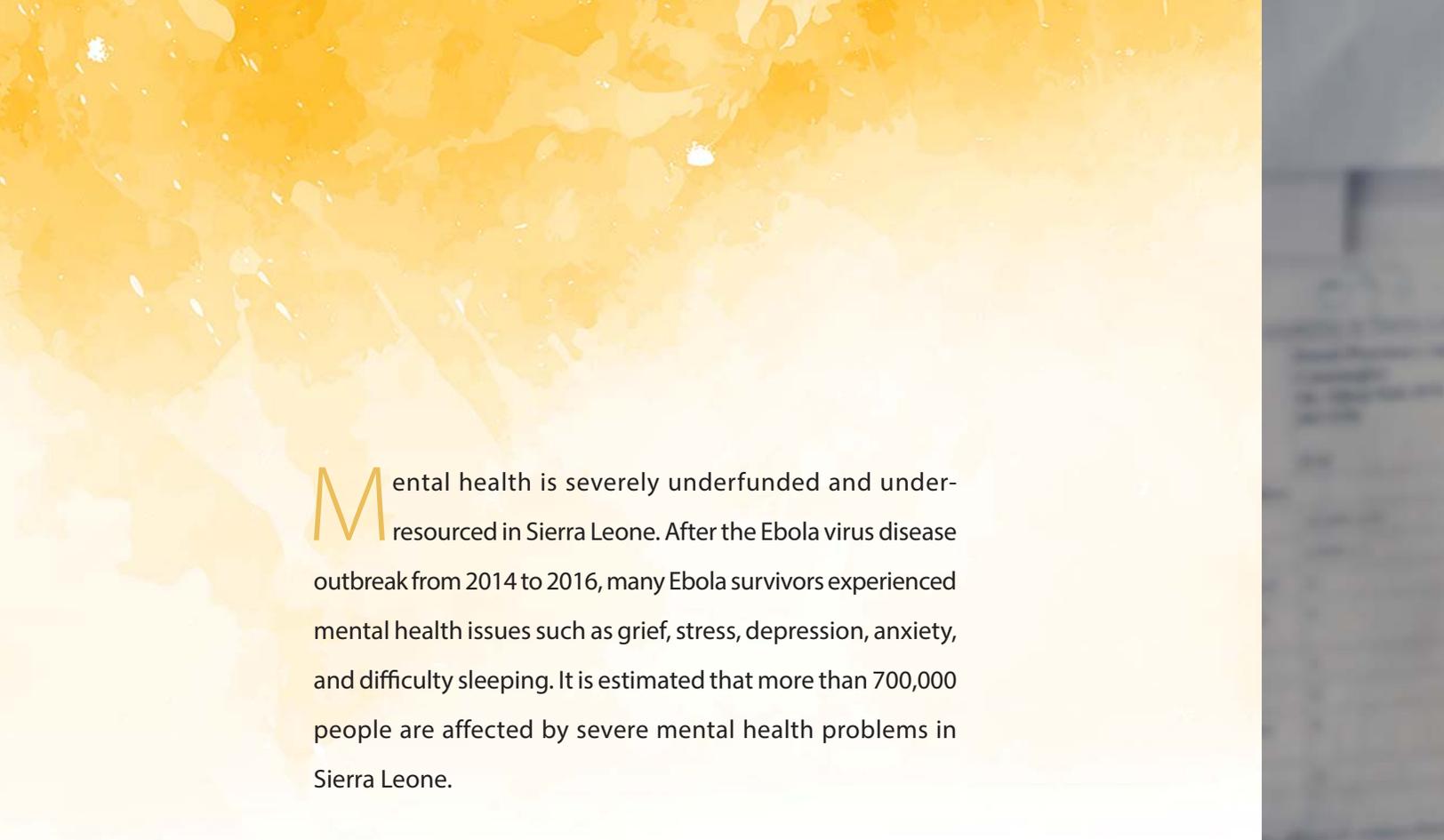




MENTAL HEALTH NURSES

LEADING POST-EBOLA RECOVERY IN SIERRA LEONE





Mental health is severely underfunded and under-resourced in Sierra Leone. After the Ebola virus disease outbreak from 2014 to 2016, many Ebola survivors experienced mental health issues such as grief, stress, depression, anxiety, and difficulty sleeping. It is estimated that more than 700,000 people are affected by severe mental health problems in Sierra Leone.

Poor overall understanding of mental health conditions and limited mental health training and education in the health workforce has led to high levels of stigma toward mental health patients. Advancing Partners & Communities, through the Ebola Transmission Prevention and Survivor Services Program, is working with the World Health Organization, the Kings Sierra Leone Partnership, and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation to build the capacity of mental health nurses in Sierra Leone. Mental health nurses from all 14 districts have been trained to identify, treat, and follow up with patients who have mental health issues; and refer these patients when necessary. The nurses are providing mental health support on a range of issues, including post-traumatic stress such as that suffered by Ebola survivors and Ebola affected communities.





Jennifer Duncan

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With support from the King's Sierra Leone Partnership, Advancing Partners & Communities has supported the roll out of the Link Nurse Program. The program strengthens mental health awareness across hospitals to ensure staff have basic capacities to recognize mental health issues and refer them appropriately.

Jennifer Duncan

Jennifer Duncan is a mental health nurse at Connaught Hospital in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The Ebola epidemic highlighted the need for mental health in Sierra Leone and led to the opening of mental health units across the country, including the one where Jennifer works. Jennifer recalls, "People were traumatized, bereaved, and displaced. They needed support."

In addition to supporting their mental health needs, mental health nurses often help Ebola survivors address stigma and discrimination in their communities. "I worked with a 24-year old Ebola survivor who had been expelled from university because of Ebola," Jennifer explains. "I [provided him support] and worked with the university to let him back in. I was glad to help find a solution for him."

Jennifer receives continuous professional development support from Advancing Partners & Communities.

"When I first began [as a mental health nurse], people had no awareness of mental illness—they thought it was all witchcraft. Today they know there is help, from medicines to therapy." Jennifer now trains other nurses at health facilities in basic mental health awareness and has trained more than 100 health care workers in psychological first aid and referrals. "The hospital staff at Connaught know what to look for and refer people to me as needed," she says.

"I do ongoing psycho-education, for patients and their relatives, so they understand that it is an illness, but that there is treatment. I try to help people understand that they should not stigmatize [others]."

"This work has helped me find an emotional balance in my life. I am passionate about this work, and have realized it's really a part of me. I really enjoy seeing people get better."

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