

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

GIVING OLDER PEOPLE A VOICE IN LIBERIA, WEST AFRICA Slewion, Sam Togba

In Liberia, March 2015 marked Social Work Month which was celebrated under the global theme: "Promoting the Dignity and Worth of All Peoples. In celebrating this month, Sam Togba Slewion wrote this brief communication to give recognition to an effort which has manifested into giving a unified voice to older people in Liberia.

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In Liberia, we celebrated March as Social Work Month under the global theme: “Promoting the Dignity and Worth of All Peoples “I want to give recognition to an effort which has manifested into giving a unified voice to older people in Liberia, West Africa.

This effort began during the peak of the Ebola crisis in Liberia in August 2014, but the theme of this year's celebration of Social Work Month does seem to perfectly characterize the spirit which drove the Social Work Department of the United Methodist University (UMU), Liberia, West, Africa, through its Center for Community Advancement and Family Empowerment (CECAFE), to engage the Ageing Unit of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare of Liberia to ascertain what was the government doing specifically for older people amidst the Ebola crisis. This desire to engage the government was predicated on the premise when it was observed that there was no specific response strategy for older people in the Liberian government's National Response Plan to fight the Ebola crisis. I serve as

Director of the CECAFE, which is an extension of the Social Work Department of the UMU.

Although we later confirmed that there was no specific response for older people in the government's National Response Plan, we did not give up in our advocacy consistent with our core value: The Dignity and the Worth of a Person; and persistently engaged the government to ensure that the older people of Liberia was not only recognized as a vulnerable group in the crisis, but also an important social group of our society. This persistent advocacy later paid off when the Ageing Unit later assembled provider's agencies of retirement homes (called Old Folk Homes in Liberia) at a meeting and I was asked to serve as facilitator of the meeting.

Based on the outcome of the meeting, a second meeting was held and this time the attendance was higher and included advocacy groups for older people in Liberia. At the end of a series of meetings, a consensus was reached by the groups to form a national group known as the Coalition of Caregivers and Advocates for the Elderly in

Liberia (COCAEL), which today is the umbrella organization in Liberia advocating to improve the quality of life of older people through policy changes and better services.

Notably among its work since its inception is the creation of the COCAEL Ebola Response Committee to cater specifically for older people and fill the gap in the National Response Plan to fight Ebola in Liberia. The Committee, which comprises representatives of provider agencies, caregivers and advocates, is undertaking a massive campaign of soliciting items to enable the group to provide food items, preventive and awareness materials and health education for older people residing in Old Folk's Homes and various communities in Liberia during the Ebola crisis and now in the post-Ebola period. The Committee has received positive responses and distributed items to older people in need, but its work still continues in the post Ebola era in Liberia to make sure that older people are not forgotten in the Ebola crisis and continue not to be forgotten in our national policy planning.

In addition to mobilizing resources for older people, for the first time provider agencies and advocates for the elderly in Liberia came together and celebrated World Older People Day held globally on October 1 2014, under the coordination of COCAEL. The impressive ceremony was held to recognize the contributions of older people in Liberia amid the on-going Ebola crisis under a contextualized theme: "Do not leave Liberia's Older People behind," which is a modification of the universal theme of this year's celebration, "Leaving No One Behind: Promoting a Society for all".

While the group is proud of the above accomplishments, it is not complacent and now expanding its support network to enhance its capacity to effectively serve older people in Liberia. The group is seeking partnerships with leading international organizations on ageing, including the International Federation of Ageing in Canada, the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA) in Washington, DC, USA and Helpage International in London, UK.

As we celebrate Social Work Month I felt compelled to share this story which not only manifest the positive outcome of a collective action of a group, but also embodies the core values of Social Work, including service, social justice, importance of human relationships and above all the dignity and worth of the person, recognizing that as social workers we have a moral obligation and ethical responsibility to treat each person with dignity and treat people in a caring and respectful manner. This action also manifest the theme under which the US-based National Association of Social Workers (NASW) celebrates this year's Social Work Month, which is: "Social Work Paves the Way for Change."

Indeed this single act of advocacy has paved the way for change and will forever impact the treatment of older people in Liberia, as collectively we are determined to change the narratives and the status quo for the betterment of older people. It is our hope that this story inspires all of us as we observe our core value- service to

all peoples, despite the circumstances we find ourselves
as we celebrate Social Work Month – 2015.