



# SPOTLIGHT: ONE YEAR LATER: LIBERIA'S GREAT STRIDES TO SCALE THE MHERO PLATFORM

February 2016 By Emily Nicholson

The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in Liberia sent its first mHero messages in November 2014 – a time when Ebola was spreading quickly through West Africa. As country leaders watched patients – and health workers – losing the battle with the virus they were spurred to take action. The mHero platform provided one way to deliver lifesaving information to health workers through their mobile phones and facilitated important health system validations, such as confirming health worker and facility status.

What a difference a year makes. mHero has not only taken root in the ministry but has bloomed into a strong program with enormous potential to play a unique role in giving health workers access to ministry staff in Monrovia.

## THE TEAM GROWS

In the summer of 2015, IntraHealth International received an innovation grant through the USAID

Grand Challenges awards, which provides funding to support the continued scale up and implementation of mHero in Liberia as well as in Guinea and Sierra Leone. Through this funding, IntraHealth has been able to build the capacity of Liberia's mHero team to scale the platform from a small pilot, working alongside the health ministry to think more strategically and creatively about how mHero can help support communication with health workers.

What has "scale" looked like this past year? It includes formally institutionalizing the processes by which Directors and others within the health ministry can create a SMS message flow and send it to health workers. Establishing these processes is crucial to the sustainability of mHero.

Led by Stephen Gbanyan, Director of Health Management Information Systems, the mHero team has worked tirelessly to ensure the communication platform is utilized within the Ministry. This hasn't been an easy task, as



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institutionalizing a new system never is, but Stephen is fortunate to have been aided in this undertaking by Rodney Cummings, Assistant Technician, and Hellen Greene Bannie and Mawen Duwor, both mHero Data Managers.

The ministry now views mHero as its primary communication tool, enabling leaders at the central offices in Monrovia to send messages to health workers and collect information from them. “Even though its text based, the mHERO platform is envisioned as a cross-cutting piece of our systems,” Rodney said. “From its inception, mHero has served as a communication link between the districts and counties to the central level MOH.”

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Yet before mHero could become a full-fledged communication and data collecting platform, the ministry had to ensure they were reaching the right health workers.

Last fall, Rodney recognized that in order for mHero to be truly effective, it was essential that the data on the Liberian health workforce contained in iHRIS, the Ministry’s human resource information system, be up to date. He sent out a call for health

workers to come to the central offices in Monrovia to validate the information contained in their personnel records, including their cell phone numbers and their position titles.



***Rodney Cummings taking a photo of a health worker to update her record in iHRIS.***

And come they did—for several weeks the ministry was abuzz with health workers coming from facilities across the country to ensure that their data were recorded in the system.

## **RAISING AWARENESS**

The mHero team knew that they also had to publicize the system within the ministry, so Directors and Unit Heads would use it to support communication with their respective teams of health workers in the counties. In addition, the team had to teach these ministry officials the process they had developed for accessing and utilizing the platform.

In September 2015, Stephen and his team organized a mHero Working Session at the Ministry to get the word out and to encourage individuals to use mHero for communicating with facilities and health workers across Liberia’s 15 counties. The session was well received, with participants representing units throughout the ministry.

Participants discussed their challenges communicating with staff in the field, both in terms of routine data collection and urgent, ad-hoc requests. In the session they prioritized use cases, or ways in which mHero could be used to address communication needs. Proposed ideas varied widely, underscoring the multitude of ways in which mHero can be utilized. These use cases included such topics as the availability of family planning commodities, informing staff that they had been placed on the Ministry's payroll and data collection on mental health diagnoses. Before any messages were sent, Hellen and Mawen met with individuals from many Units to refine use cases and determine the exact text that would be used in the SMS. As a result, 17 distinct new use cases were sent out to over 5,000 health workers by December 31, 2015.

## INTEGRATING MHERO

In mid-December of 2015, the Ministry convened a meeting to finalize the country's Health Information System (HIS) & Information Communication Technology (ICT) Strategy Plan for 2016-2021. With advocacy from the mHero team and country leaders' commitment to health information systems, mHero was included in the strategy.

Inclusion in this plan is an enormous achievement, for it demonstrates how far the platform has come in one year and assures that it will be sustained in the years to come.

"For now, mHERO is directly linked only to iHRIS, but by the time the HIS architecture grows enough to incorporate another HR database, like one for [community health workers], I believe there will be a great need for mHero," Rodney said.

## LOOKING AHEAD

In December 2015, just a week before the Christmas holiday, the mHero team members – Stephen, Rodney, Hellen and Mawen – traveled to six of Liberia's fifteen counties to meet with District Health Management Teams.

They led trainings on iHRIS and conducted needs assessments to determine what equipment is necessary for iHRIS optimization. Their field visits also raised health workers' awareness of mHero, a critical step to ensuring a strong response rate to SMS sent by the Ministry.

For many health workers in the counties, this was their first exposure to the information systems



***Hellen Green Bannie conducting on-the-job iHRIS training with HR Officers, Cape Mount County.***

which support their work." For [the] Ministry's ambitious HIS plans to become a reality, we need policies for enforcement, and legislation that assigns clearly defined roles and responsibility to the systems," Rodney said.

The team also discussed an exciting new use of mHero in the future: plans are being developed so that SMS can originate with the health workers themselves, offering them a direct line of communication to Ministry staff at the central level.

"I think it is about time we find a way the Health Workers can communicate directly to us," Stephan said. "A health worker may have some burning

issues to share, but we may [be] missing his or her concerns.”

While the intensity of the Ebola outbreak has waned and only few cases remain in the region, the Ministry knows they must stay vigilant, as new cases are likely to appear. Maintaining a connection with their health workforce in the counties is a critical component of this vigilance. Beyond outbreaks such as Ebola, stakeholders like the mHero team know that strengthened health information systems like iHRIS and mHero will ensure they are better prepared for what is to come.

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