

Sierra Leone and the Community Health Officer

Author Profiles:

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A receiver of the higher diploma in community health with additional diploma in general surgery and OB/GYN and recent Bachelor of Science (BSc) in community health sciences, Lawrence Teteh Kargbo serves his community as a provider with a similar role to that of a physician assistant (PA) in the United States. Representing his colleagues as the national president for Surgical Community Health Officers (CHO), the Vice Chairman for the Sierra Leone Association of Community Health Officers (SLACHO) and the third Vice Chairman for the Global Association of Clinical Officers and Physician Associates (GACOPA) in Africa, he continues to serve those whose knowledge and access to medical care remains limited. He provides further education to his medical colleagues as a volunteer lecturer at Njala University Bo in southern Sierra Leone and personally is working on a Master's in Public Health so that his outreach can go beyond that of one profession and the classroom.

Musa Baimba Sillah

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A pending graduate for the Master's in Public Health (MPH) degree in Sierra Leone, Musa Baimba Sillah doubles as a Community Health Officer (CHO) for the Ministry of Health (MOH) as well as serves as the National Chairman of SLACHO. Thoroughly trained in multiple areas of medicine, Mr. Sillah maintains a Certificate in Management and Leadership in Health, a Higher Diploma in Community Health and Clinical

Studies, a BSc in Community Health and Clinical Studies, and has experience as a master trainer for community health workers. Musa strives to advance his skills within the community while continuing to be a facilitator for management of neonatal and childhood illnesses. His personal experience in the CHO profession has prompted his involvement in this research. Musa is also Vice President of Cooperative Affairs for the West African Association of Physician Assistants Association (WAAPA)

General Information:

The CHO profession began as a response to the growing demand for improvement in primary health care after the Alma Ata Conference in 1978. Its Paramedical School, established in 1983, would go on to produce the country’s inaugural graduates in 1986. Initially, the institution was funded by the European Union (EU) and was mandated to train scientifically oriented and multivalent health workers to replace those dispensers and Endemic Disease Control Units (EDCU) Assistants that were manning Peripheral Health Units (PHU) within the country. After three years, graduates were deemed Community Health Technicians (CHT). Further need for medical training to keep pace with the healthcare demands within the country would promote the development of a more advanced training program for which CHTs could also participate to further their knowledge base and skill sets.

During its initial years, CHO programs were under the control of the MOH of Sierra Leone. At this time, they were only allowed to enroll 30 students per program and administer a certificate for the program. It wasn’t until 2005 when Njala University—the only school to maintain a program in the country—took over, increasing enrollment to 150 students per program and implementing a Higher Diploma for Community Health and Clinical Sciences (for CHOs). In 2008, the first set of Community Health Assistants (CHA) were admitted and graduate with a Diploma in Community Health and Clinical Sciences (as CHA). The first Bsc (Honors) in Community Health and Clinical Sciences started in 2015. Now, over a 100 students per year will graduate from the Njala University Bo Campus (formerly Paramedical School, Bo) to join the approximate 2,100 graduates who practice throughout the country.

Entry Criteria:

Different entry criteria exist for Community Health Assistants, Community Health Technicians, and Community Health Officers. The criteria are as follows:

Comparison of Entry Criteria of CHT, CHA, CHO

Community Health Assistants (CHA)- First Level	Community Health Technicians (CHT)-Second Level	Community Health Officers (CHO)-Highest Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High School with four credit in the WASSCE examination or <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maternal and Child Health Aide or State enrolled Community Health nurse or Endemic Disease Control Unit with more 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least five credits • West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination or • Graduate Certificate Exam/O level or • Register nurse with four credit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have completed CHT program and • Work for at least 3 years and • Complete university requirements or • First degree in science related field such as Bsc in nursing, Bsc in environmental health,

than two years experience with 3 credit in the WASSCE examination	in GCE or WASSCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 year program with additional one year post bac. 	Bsc Public Health, Bsc pharmacy etc.
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After all requirements are met, interested students must complete an interview that is highly competitive. An entrance exam was present prior to 2005; but it is no longer required. There is no required clinical experience to enter the CHO program; however, it is recommended.

Education:

Training for the CHO, CHT, and CHA programs center around primary health care, health education, health management systems, community engagement and empowerment, mental/oral health, community-based rehabilitation, and minor surgical procedures. At this time, Njala University does not publicly provide a breakdown of their CHO program curriculum on their website. An overview is as follows:

Category of CHO Training	Description
Medical Education/Knowledge	3-4 years (6-8 semesters) depending on the point of entry
Clinical Field / Attachment	entire program duration assigned to approved/suitable health facilities
Practical and Internship Placement	1 year duration (final year) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 70% community based, 30% clinic location

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As mentioned the Bsc program started in 2015. With this came the introduction of the three layers of training for CHOs which include:

- Community Health Officers (CHOs) (Bsc Graduate)
- **CHT** (Higher Diploma graduate/previous CHO certificate)
- Community Health Assistants (CHAs) (Diploma)

Financing Education:

The government of Sierra Leone provides subsidies to Njala University in order for the program to be financed. In addition to program costs, the government--along with public/private donations and some

contribution from the MOH and Ministry of Finance (MOF)--will pay 75% of lecturer salaries and occasionally compensate foreign lecturers.

Accrediting/Regulatory Bodies:

While the West Africa Health Organization has some stipulations on the regulation of CHOs, no official regulatory body currently exists for the profession in Sierra Leone. Further advocacy involvement from the West African Association of Physician Assistants (WAAPA) exists; however, little progress has been made. A private member bill was passed in parliament in 2017 but the president and Minister of Health did not approve this independent body for regulation. The current government is attempting to pass an Allied Health Professional bill which will include CHOs; however, it is not a specific regulatory body for CHOs. Sierra Leone Association of Community Health Officers (SLACHO) continues to work alongside these organizations to advocate for the profession in the hope of change. Yet, agreement to terms is yet to be seen on the horizon.

Accreditation is provided by the following organizations:

Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), Sierra Leone
No 8 Jones Street
PO Box 67
Freetown, Sierra Leone

Other supporting organizations for the profession

The MOH assists with employment of CHOs and creating policies for training/accreditation. The Ministry of Labor (MOL) proves useful in time where industrial strike and welfare concerns arise; and the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Sierra Leone builds the foundations of procedural and technical support in both the quality and policies that exist within the schools.

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Professional Licensure:

Upon completion of the program, students will be presented by the University for a comprehensive examination. This will be conducted by the appropriate registration board or Council for Community Health Practitioners at the country level. There are no additional certification examinations that qualify the profession to be enrolled into the MOH for any private practice or medical institution. There are

many barriers that exist to be enrolled in the MOH making it exceedingly challenging. A successful passing grade on the professional examination results in the provision of the BSc in Community Health. Official licensure; however, does not exist for CHOs.

Scope of Practice:

The primary role of a CHO is to take charge of peripheral/rural health units; however, each provider may also work within the hospital setting. Training focuses on diagnosis and treatment of prevalent diseases frequently encountered in village communities within Sierra Leone along with general outpatient preventative care. CHOs are trained to apply simple diagnostic tests to confirm diagnoses, record the level of occurrence of each condition, give effective treatment, and undertake general health education with each patient contact. They are also responsible for referrals of patients who fall outside of the realm of their care from their community health centers (CHC) to nearby hospitals. Each CHC (which can be comprised of multiple PHUs) provides services to anywhere between 15,000-30,000 people within a region of the country, focusing on all areas of individual health, family health, and community health/disease transmission.

Practitioners work alongside with medical doctors with a shared understanding that the doctor oversees the provision of care of the CHO for whom they employ. This agreement is defined at the practice level. CHOs have worked tending to patients during epidemics including Ebola and COVID-19.

CHOs work in the following disciplines with the following titles:

Surgical Community Health Officers
Ophthalmic Community Health Officers
Anesthetic Community Health Officers
Mental Health Community Health Officers
Monitoring and Evaluation Community Health Officers (Health Informatics)

VISION

To ensure quality improved essential primary health care service delivery throughout rural and urban Sierra Leone.

MISSION

To provide essential quality community health care services throughout rural and urban Sierra Leone using a network of sound health care personnel and supportive supervisors at the PHU level, capable of treating and controlling the incidences of common diseases and reinforcing preventive and promotive health care. Enabling communities to increase productivity and promote well-being for continued economic development of the country as a whole through integrated primary health care approach.

Maintaining Role:

At this time, there is no continuing medical education (CME) or continuing professional development (CPD) requirements to maintain the ability to practice.

Job Opportunities:

The MOH currently employs approximately 800 CHOs on payroll, but more than 300 have been left to volunteer their services within the department until a full-time position becomes available. Other CHOs can work in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or private sectors. There is no available list online for job openings for these providers at this time.

References:

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