



FIRST PERSON Counting Out Malaria One Village at a Time

Young and old foot soldiers in the fight against malaria



Photo: The Mentor Initiative

Isaac Tengbeh is 75 years old and actively involved in malaria prevention in Liberia.

“I’m proof that you’re never too old to join the fight against malaria; the elders have an important role in the communities,” said community health volunteer Isaac Tengbeh.

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USAID and the Presidential Malaria Initiative work with local partners and the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in all 15 of Liberia’s counties to cure and prevent malaria. With malaria medicine and bednets now available, one of the most challenging aspects of the fight against the disease is public awareness and door-to-door outreach to persuade people to use mosquito nets correctly and to seek treatment from qualified providers.

Among the participants in rural Todee District’s initial community volunteer training was an elderly man named Isaac Tengbeh. Born in 1934, Tengbeh exudes plenty of energy and enthusiasm. But he has low literacy and math skills and struggled with quizzes given by the trainers. The group did not elect Tengbeh to the newly-formed Community Malaria Working Group.

Regardless, Tengbeh began attending every single meeting as an observer to learn as much as he could. Given his dedication and his commitment to learning, Tengbeh was finally assigned as the representative for the elders and now serves as an officially elected member of the Community Malaria Working Group for Todee District, in rural Montserrado County. He has participated actively in awareness campaigns, including a 10-day house-to-house campaign leading up to World Malaria Day.

Tengbeh is proud of his involvement. “I’m proof that you’re never too old to join the fight against malaria; the elders have an important role in the communities,” he said.

In rural districts like Todee, community health volunteers sometimes walk three or four hours to reach villages where they discuss the purpose of their visit with the village chief. With the chief’s permission, they share the malaria messages with village residents. Some people resist saying bednets would make them too hot or hurt their skin. In other cases, people discount the dangers of malaria, selling the nets or using them to make curtains, to strain food, or to fish.

Overall, Tengbeh and his fellow volunteers are proud to see more people recognizing malaria symptoms and going to the health center to receive treatment. Their observations are borne out by the 2009 Malaria Indicator Survey showing that use of the recommended drug therapy increased in Liberia from 5% in 2005 to 30% in 2009.