Community Volunteers at the Heart of Successful Mosquito Net Distribution in Ghana

Patricia Sarpong did not want a malaria-preventing bed net in her home. The married mother of two, living in the Ejisu-Juaben District in Ghana’s Ashanti Region, had hung bed nets in her home before. The nets she used previously were not treated with insecticide, and she felt that they did not protect her family from malaria-transmitting mosquitoes, which bite at night when people are sleeping. Teddy Boachie and Angela Tetteh, volunteers from her own community going door-to-door to deliver and hang long-lasting insecticidal nets (LLINs), convinced her to allow insecticide-treated nets in her home. When asked about her new net, Ms. Sarpong said, “I am very happy about it. I will sleep under the net every night.”

Nationwide LLIN Campaign in Ghana

Mr. Boachie and Ms. Tetteh volunteered as part of a region-wide LLIN hang-up campaign, organized through a partnership led by Ghana’s National Malaria Control Program (NMCP) and the Promoting Malaria Prevention and Treatment (ProMPT) project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the President’s Malaria Initiative (PMI) and implemented by University Research Co., LLC (URC).

NMCP, together with ProMPT and other partners, has relied heavily on community volunteers like Mr. Boachie and Ms. Tetteh to reach its goal of universal coverage of LLINs, defined as one net for every two persons in a household. Distributing and hanging bed nets are a key NMCP strategy to combat malaria, which is responsible for almost a third of child deaths in the country. Using a model developed with support from ProMPT, the NMCP works with government officials and civil society at all levels to plan for LLIN mass campaigns. During the campaign, LLINs are delivered and hung in pre-registered households. One vital component of this model is the identification, training, and equipping of community volunteers to register households; deliver and hang the nets in the homes of their neighbors, friends, and other fellow community members; and provide education on the benefits of LLINs and how to care for them.

Volunteers’ Messages Promote Net Use

Community volunteers are essential to these LLIN campaigns for several reasons. Volunteers are needed first because the number of people required to hang nets in all homes in the country is enormous: in Ashanti Region where Ms. Sarpong lives, an estimated 40,000 volunteers were trained.
to hang nets. In addition, the volunteers interact one-on-one with household residents to register them and deliver messages on the importance of sleeping under nets and the proper ways to use and care for the nets. This personal interaction allows volunteers to provide tailored advice to their community members and encourages more discussion about preventing malaria, making it more likely that the nets will be properly used. Finally, since the volunteers come from the communities in which they work, they are much more likely to be well-received when asking to enter residents’ homes and bedrooms, where the nets need to be hung.

For Ms. Sarpong, the volunteers’ clear messages that her new net was treated with insecticide and will kill insects on contact were enough to convince her to allow them into her home to hang an LLIN over her bed. An evaluation of the LLIN campaign in Ghana’s Northern Region showed that residents’ main source of information regarding malaria prevention and treatment was campaign volunteers. Of the households that received messages, 81.0% had at least one member who slept under a net the previous night, whereas only 72.8% of households that did not receive messages had at least one member who slept under a net the previous night. The difference was statistically significant (p=0.034).

Communities Recruit Local Volunteers

In order to recruit volunteers for the campaigns, district-level NMCP planners coordinate with communities to identify volunteers for the LLIN campaigns. The process for selecting volunteers varies by community: volunteers can include those already working as health volunteers, citizens nominated by community leaders, or members of civil society organizations including student clubs and churches. Individual communities are also responsible for determining ways to motivate their volunteers; many supply volunteers with meals, soft drinks, small stipends, and other kinds of incentives to show their appreciation. In Ejisu-Juaben, each household was requested to make an optional contribution of 50 pesewas (about 30 cents) to the volunteers. Both the volunteers for household registration and the volunteers for hang-up receive a half-day training in their various tasks shortly before they begin their work. The people who train volunteers are Ghana Health Services staff, who have participated in higher-level training-of-trainers sessions delivered by NMCP and ProMPT staff. Volunteers are equipped with the tools that they needed to complete their work, including nets, ropes, hammers, and a laminated job aid, which reminds them of key information to give to community members.

The volunteers in Ejisu-Juaben, including Mr. Boachie and Ms. Tetteh, hung about 100 nets per day, working in often-sweating conditions to ensure that households in their community had the LLINs that they need to prevent malaria. When asked why she was doing this work, another community volunteer, Bella Agyapong, explained, “Malaria is a major problem in my community. When my friend asked me to help with this campaign, I agreed because I want to help the people here prevent malaria.”

NMCP, ProMPT, and other partners are deploying community volunteers for malaria prevention in other ways. ProMPT has provided support to 33 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have trained volunteers in hard-to-reach communities to mobilize their fellow residents to take action against malaria. The NMCP is also launching a program to train volunteers to provide malaria diagnosis and treatment in communities. In addition, congregational leaders from churches and mosques throughout the country bring malaria prevention information to their members.

About ProMPT

Since 2009, ProMPT has worked with the NMCP to strengthen malaria prevention and control and scale up evidence-based malaria interventions. The project is building the NMCP’s capacity and effectiveness and is engaging NGOs, communities, and the private sector to broaden the program’s reach. The main components of the ProMPT project include developing effective systems to distribute LLINs and promote their use, improving the quality of malaria diagnosis and treatment and malaria-in-pregnancy services, strengthening monitoring and evaluation for collection and analysis of accurate data, building capacity of NGOs to implement community-based malaria activities, mobilizing broad sectors of civil society for malaria prevention and control, and extending malaria classification and treatment through community case management.