

# Leveraging Ambassadors to Support COVID-19 Vaccine Uptake and Malaria Prevention

## A Technical Brief

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# Acronyms

CCA	Client communication ambassador
CHT	County health team
DHT	District health team
IPCC	Interpersonal communication and counseling
MOH	Ministry of Health
NMCP	Liberia National Malaria Control Program
SBC	Social and behavior change
TM	Trusted messenger
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VA	Vaccine ambassador

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# Background

Breakthrough ACTION, a seven-year global social and behavior change (SBC) project, works in Liberia to maximize opportunities to increase community attendance of health services. To do this, the project develops coordinated multi-channel activities that address health behaviors for multiple health areas including malaria; maternal, newborn, and child health; family planning and reproductive health; water, sanitation, and hygiene; priority zoonotic disease prevention; and COVID-19 vaccine uptake. At district and community levels, all community engagement, mobilization, and advocacy efforts focus on strengthening individual, community, and system capacity to implement integrated SBC interventions.

This brief, designed for SBC practitioners, focuses on leveraging “ambassadors” to either activate or promote key health behaviors. The approach is informed by constructs from the theory of planned behavior,<sup>1</sup> which states that behaviors are influenced by intentions. Practitioners can determine intentions (conscious or unconscious) according to three critical factors: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Through actions, discussions, and networks, ambassadors can use this determination method to shift personal attitudes and either establish new norms or reframe existing social pressures in favor of a behavior.

Since 2021, Breakthrough ACTION Liberia has worked with ambassadors to activate behaviors within their (formal or informal) network. As influential leaders within a recognized network, ambassadors model behaviors (they actively carry out and promote the desired behaviors) and act as a resource (they address and troubleshoot barriers to carrying out the desired behavior). These community-based “ambassadors,” supported by Breakthrough ACTION, have helped increase COVID-19 vaccine rates. The project is now adapting and scaling up the approach to improve interpersonal communication and counseling (IPCC) for malaria service provision.

## Lessons from COVID-19

### Using Vaccine Ambassadors and Trusted Messengers to Increase COVID-19 Vaccine Uptake

In 2021, acceptance of the COVID-19 vaccine was initially low across Liberia. To increase COVID-19 vaccination rates, Breakthrough ACTION proposed the use of ambassadors. In close coordination with County Health Teams (CHTs) and District Health Teams (DHTs), the project selected leaders based on their proven ability to influence persons residing in their communities and/or other social networks on health issues (e.g., religious, traditional, local governance, marketing associations, and transport

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<sup>1</sup>Ajzen, I. (1991.) The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179-211. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978\(91\)90020-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T)

unions). Once recruited, they were invited to attend a one-day orientation that covered topics related to COVID-19 (e.g., disease, vaccine safety, risks, benefits) and social mobilization and community engagement strategies. Once the leaders completed a predetermined number of engagements, they received the title of Vaccine Ambassadors (VAs). They reached thousands, and in Grand Gedeh, 1,273 people received vaccinations after engaging with the ambassadors (Figure 1).

In 2022, to reach more community members and boost vaccination rates, Breakthrough ACTION saw the need to add a new cadre of ambassadors called Trusted Messengers (TMs). The key difference between VAs and TMs is the source of the recruited individuals. The project intentionally recruited TMs from among community groups tied to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. As such, they came to the TM role with less background knowledge of health issues. To address the knowledge gap, the health component of their one-day orientation included additional details (e.g., how vaccines improve immunity) to ensure TMs were able to confidently advocate for health issues.

Following the initial orientation, ambassadors (both VAs and TMs) disseminated COVID-19 vaccine information through their networks to reduce vaccine hesitancy by normalizing the vaccine; addressing concerns about the vaccine; debunking rumors on the vaccine; and providing additional details on safety, dosage requirements, and vaccine availability to encourage peers to get vaccinated. They served voluntarily in and out of their respective networks to increase COVID-19 vaccine uptake. To keep the ambassadors engaged, Breakthrough ACTION provided a non-monetary incentive package (including branded “Healthy Life” jackets) to those who turned in at

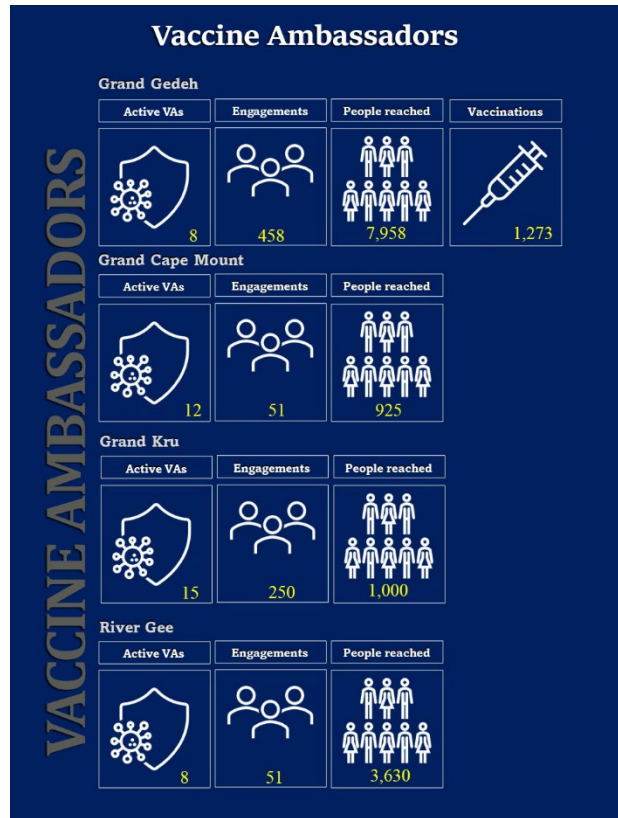


Figure 1. Metrics for the VAs' reach in four counties.

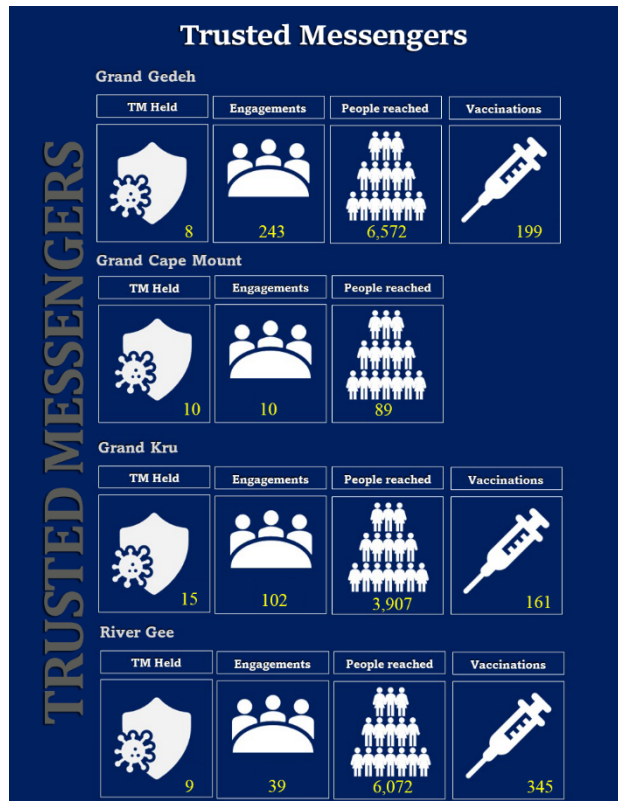


Figure 2. Metrics for the TMs' reach in four counties.

least five verified event monitoring forms that they filled out after in-person engagements. Like the VAs, TMs reached thousands (**Figure 2**).

The project offered public recognition for the ambassadors (both VAs and TMs), which included two components: (1) Recognized ambassadors received an opportunity to share personal testimonials during a live radio talk show alongside CHT senior staff; and (2) recognized ambassadors also publicly received a certificate signed by both the County Health Officer and Breakthrough ACTION Liberia's Chief of Party.

## Lessons Learned

- Ambassadors can leverage existing networks and reduce logistical constraints (i.e., transportation) for CHTs and DHTs. They already live and work in all areas of the county, including difficult-to-reach places.
- Ambassadors exemplify a partnership with community levels. VAs feel a sense of ownership and accountability for the health status of their community members.
- Ambassadors are known entities in their communities. This increases trust and reduces hesitancy for new and unfamiliar health information and/ or services (i.e., COVID-19 vaccine).
- Ambassadors can also potentially support repeated exposure to health messages as the community members continue to interact with VAs which can support behavior change, such as increased uptake of vaccines.
- Ambassadors can increase access to timely information and create visibility. This especially helped in areas of the country with limited access to mass media sources such as internet and radio.

## Incorporating Vaccine Ambassador Lessons to Enhance Service Provision for Malaria

To be effective and trusted, health providers must show empathy and be able to effectively communicate with their clients. Knowledge and competence play a large role in delivering high-quality care. However, additional factors affect the quality of care delivered by health providers, such as trust, client satisfaction, quality of interpersonal communication and counseling skills, and availability of resources to meet the demand for services. Since April 2022, Breakthrough ACTION Liberia has trained over 320 service providers across 12 counties on interpersonal communication and counseling skills (IPCC). The providers, primarily antenatal care (ANC) providers and facility-based screeners received training on IPCC in close collaboration with CHTs. Training topics aimed to address harmful norms in service provider communication and behavior such as provider bias, and improve provider communication, empathy, and problem-solving skills. By improving their communication skills, increasing their knowledge of their role and counseling, and clarifying expectations for social and workplace norms, Breakthrough ACTION has improved the quality of client-provider interactions. By building their communication and counseling skills, service providers will gain a better understanding of

their client's perspectives, improve their relationships with clients, and ultimately, will result in a greater sense of trust and confidence in the health system.

Since training service providers, Breakthrough ACTION Liberia collaborated with CHTs to follow up on IPCC through routine supervision. A new component of this follow-up is an adapted use of the ambassador model, Client Communication Ambassadors (CCAs). To initiate the approach, CHTs selected ambassadors (either district supervisors or service providers) who actively and regularly practiced the desired IPCC skills and were respected by their peers. Breakthrough ACTION jointly selected 110 CCAs who were further trained as mentors who could support and inspire other service providers to continue improving their IPCC skills. Client Communication Ambassadors are also trained in the use of the newly developed service provider communication tool for the provision of malaria prevention services during ANC visits. Each CCA was identified, selected, and trained in close collaboration with county and district health teams and in alignment with approved Ministry of Health (MOH)/Liberia National Malaria Control Program (NMCP) terms of reference. This process not only creates a sense of ownership by the county, but it also serves to avoid parallel structures and functions and lays the groundwork for sustainable inclusion within the formal health system.



*A client communication ambassador counsels a woman on malaria prevention. Credit: Breakthrough ACTION*

CCAs model high-quality IPCC skills in their own work and serve as communication coaches to other facility-based peers to increase the uptake of malaria preventive services. CCAs can reinforce IPCC behaviors by identifying areas where peer facility-based providers can elevate the quality of care by service providers. After identifying areas of improvement, CCAs complete a set of follow-up visits within a given time period. The expectation is that CCAs will catalyze and coach peers on improvements in select IPCC behaviors that ultimately enhance the client experience, increase client satisfaction, increase client demand for services, and as well as improve adherence to MOH/NMCP guidelines. To date, the CCA approach has been rolled out in Margibi, Montserrado, Maryland, River Gee, Bomi, Bong, Lofa, Nimba, Grand Gedeh, Grand Bassa, Bong, Lofa, and Grand Kru Counties.

Selected individuals (whether VAs or CCAs) are trusted sources of information that work within the communities on health-promoting initiatives. Despite differences in setting and professional backgrounds, both VAs and CCAs use effective SBC communication techniques to achieve program goals and objectives.

Although the CCAs are existing CHT staff driven by the passion to serve their districts or counties, they also need recognition and motivation to contribute to improving service delivery outcomes. CCAs will receive public recognition for outstanding performances during the County Quarterly Review Meeting,

which will include representatives from Breakthrough ACTION Liberia, CHTs and DHTs, and implementing partners. Recognition will also include motivation packages such as certificates, prepaid cellular data cards, and branded backpacks containing a notebook and pen, to outstanding CCAs and facilities. Such individuals and facilities used effective communication that helped ensure patients come to their first ANC visit, receive an insecticide-treated net, per national malaria-in-pregnancy guidelines, and complete three or more doses of IPTp. Such successful endeavors serve as positive reinforcement to further improve service delivery at other health facilities.

As with the COVID-19 ambassadors, the project lays out the expectation that CCAs work with integrity, honesty, and commitment. As implementation of the CCA approach continues, Breakthrough ACTION will adapt the approach, document the results, and share success stories that emerge.

## Scaling Up the Ambassador Approach

By recruiting ambassadors from local communities in collaboration with CHTs and DHTs, this process not only creates a sense of ownership by the county, but it also serves to avoid parallel structures and functions. Selected individuals become “ambassadors,” or trusted sources of information who work within communities on health-promoting initiatives. Despite the differences in setting and professional backgrounds, VAs, TMs, and CCAs use effective SBC approaches to achieve the program goals and objectives.