

CASE STUDY: MENTAL HEALTH REFORM IN LEBANON

CAREGIVER MENTAL HEALTH KNOWLEDGE SHARING SERIES

An increasing proportion of governments around the world are prioritizing the integration of mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS) in their national health, social welfare, development, and education strategies and budgets. The small Middle Eastern country of Lebanon is an example of how mental health reform can be successfully achieved, even in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. The massive influx of roughly 1.5 million Syrian refugees placed immense burden on Lebanon's health system; yet the health structure remained responsive to increased demand and the refugee crisis itself incited efforts to reform the country's mental health system.

In late 2013, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report¹ on mental health and psychosocial service assessment for Syrian refugees in Lebanon highlighted the need for a coordination effort to meet the country's tremendous need. In response, in the following year the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health collaborated with WHO, UNICEF, and the International Medical Corps to launch the first National Mental Health Programme to reform the mental health system and scale up services. As in many countries, mental health services in Lebanon historically were predominately offered by private sector psychiatric services, psychotherapy or hospitalization. The national program reform aimed to integrate mental health care into primary health care for those who cannot afford the private sector, with a vision that everyone living in Lebanon should have the opportunity to enjoy the highest level of mental health and well-being. The national strategy aligns with the *WHO Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2020* and takes a human rights approach by addressing the needs of vulnerable groups (displaced populations, people in prison, the families of persons missing from the war, the survivors of torture and foreign domestic workers) and by using evidence-based approaches to interpersonal psychotherapy.

Under the initiative, doctors, nurses and social workers are trained in psychological first aid and in how to identify, assess, manage and refer patients to mental health specialists based on WHO's Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP). Reforms in the health system's service organization, legislation and financing aimed to incorporate an MHPSS approach across sectors (education, protection, water sanitation and hygiene, shelter) and roll out culturally appropriate mental health services by adapting international methods and guidelines.

The reform efforts have made continual gains, including coordinating the work of over 60 organizations to increase MHPSS action with the aim of strengthening the national system that can respond to but also outlast the Syrian crisis. A "4-Ws Assessment"

(Who's doing What, Where, and until When) helped Lebanon identify existing resources and gaps, make referral links between sectors, deliver nation-wide trainings, and establish a support and supervision unit for more than 100 primary health care centers around the country. Amidst incredible challenge, Lebanon has both adapted and enhanced its mental health system to meet the growing needs of Lebanese and Syrian residents.

Read more about Lebanon's strategy, including what kind of mental services are offered and how Lebanon is funding the reformed approach to mental health care, in an interview published in the [Bulletin of the World Health Organization](#) with Rabih El Chammay is leading Lebanon's national mental health reform and has been head of the national mental health program since 2014.

Factors of Lebanon's Mental Health Reform Success¹

- Capitalizing on the momentum and increased interest in mental health created by the Syrian crisis
- Intentional policy structure to avoid building a parallel system of care
- Well-orchestrated collaboration between the Ministry of Public Health, UN agencies, and national and international non-governmental organizations
- Gaining national consensus on a mental health strategy involving all health-care sector workers and policymakers in the country
- Establishing high level political support within the Ministry for mental health reform

References:

1. Chammay R and Ammar W. Syrian crisis and mental health system reform in Lebanon. *The Lancet*. Volume 384, Issue 9942, p494. August 9, 2014. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61329-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61329-5)
2. Chammay R, Karam E, and Ammar W. Mental health reform in Lebanon and the Syrian crisis. *The Lancet Psychiatry*. March 2016. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(16\)00055-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(16)00055-9)
3. Reforming mental health in Lebanon amid refugee crises. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*. Volume 94, Number 8, August 2016, 557-63. <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/94/8/16-030816/en/>
4. The “4Ws” in Lebanon: Who’s Doing What, Where and Until When in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support. Republic of Lebanon Ministry of Public Health. Accessed 20 March 2021. <https://www.moph.gov.lb/en/Pages/0/9100/the-4ws-in-lebanon-whos-doing-what-where-and-until-when-in-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support->

Related Resources:

- [National Mental Health Strategy of Lebanon](#)
- [National Mental Health Awareness Campaign](#)
- [WHO Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020](#)

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Cynthia Bauer	Kupenda for the Children
Erin Pfeiffer	Independent Consultant
Irene Mugo	Food for the Hungry
Josephine Akellot	HealthRight International
Liz van Zyl	Food for the Hungry
Mariam Amadi	Food for the Hungry
Phil Moses	Food for the Hungry

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