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Door-to-door, volunteers in Liberia share information on Ebola prevention

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Agnes Nyantie is a community health volunteer in Liberia where she is helping to spread the word on Ebola prevention. Photo: Pablo Tosco/Oxfam

Agnes Nyantie visits 20 homes a day helping to educate families about the deadly virus in an effort to stem its spread.

By Ian Bray, Senior Humanitarian Press Officer at Oxfam Great Britain.

Agnes Nyantie's unassuming manner hides a spirit that will be key in overcoming Liberia's Ebola crisis. The 42-year-old mother of five goes on her daily door-to-door round of houses in the unsanitary back alleys of West Point, a slum north of the country's capital, to offer people advice on the deadly virus.

Yards away from West Point's narrow through-road, with its bustling street-side markets and shops offering everything from dark brown smoked fish to dentistry, Nyantie talks calmly to families about how best to prevent catching Ebola and what to do if they suspect someone has it.

The specter of Ebola tore through West Point some weeks ago, so much so that the government closed the community down and quarantined 80,000 people inside. The quarantine was supposed to be for 21 days and was met with an angry reaction. With nothing coming in or going out, people were running out of food and prices were rapidly rising. After 10 days of a stand-off and the shooting of three protestors, the government relented and lifted the quarantine.

Nyantie is one of a 100-strong team of community health volunteers who are the first line of defense in the battle against Ebola. She has been a volunteer for three years now. She used to get involved in efforts to deal with violence against women but now six days a week she does Ebola prevention, visiting 20 homes a day.

Supported by Oxfam, community health volunteers like Nyantie are fanning out across parts of Sierra Leone and Liberia to educate families about the disease and the importance of early treatment. Their efforts are part of Oxfam's awareness-raising initiative which also includes working with religious and community leaders, sharing messages on billboards, and radio broadcasts.



Children wash their hands in Clara Town, a township to the north of Liberia's capital. Pablo Tosco/Oxfam

As many people in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea don't have access to the internet or can't read, radio and word-of-mouth are key ways they get information. Oxfam has helped local radio stations produce messages, jingles, and programming about Ebola and how to stop its spread.

Explaining what this deadly disease is to families in West Point is far from easy. Nyantie lifts her hands to her eyes and says "They say they can't see it. They don't know how Ebola came. How the sickness can come."

"Ebola is dropping down and it is not the way it was before," says Nyantie, adding that in the past "people felt bad. They can't see Ebola. They don't know how people get it. They want it to go away. Then we rest in peace."

On her Ebola visit forms, which she fills out meticulously, Nyantie collects comments from people she has spoken to. The three she had collected this morning read: Ebola is going down. We feel fine now not like before. Want more doctors and medicines.

Regular hand washing is important, and outside just about every shop at the market are buckets with a tap for people to wash their hands before entering. Hand-washing buckets dot

other parts of West Point, too, where recent rains have left pools of stagnant water. People are using them regularly, and on her daily rounds, Nyantie reminds them to continue to do so.



Agnes Nyantie. Photo: Pablo Tosco/Oxfam

According to the World Health Organization, the rate of increase in Ebola cases appears to be slowing in Liberia. In West Point, Nyantie says the sound of ambulances that used to rush through the main street is not so frequent, and it has been about a month since there has been a case in her neighborhood.

Time will tell whether the slowdown in new cases is part of an ongoing trend or just a statistical blip. Whatever the case, it is clear in West Point there is not enough help coming in.

Oxfam has provided 2,000 family hygiene kits in this area which is enough for 14,000 people and though West Point's energetic commissioner, Miatta Flowers, is clearly grateful she says her area needs much more. "The material is very little and the demand is high," she says. She is worried that not having enough for the people of densely packed West Point is creating tension.

Despite the positive signs, as the Oxfam team pulled away from West Point, they were reminded that this crisis is far from over: Rolling into the capital, a posse of pickups and ambulances passed in front of them.

“Dead bodies,” said Oxfam’s Liberian colleagues.

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