Establishing a Community Advisory Group to Enhance Community Participation in Clinical Research

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INTRODUCTION- A Community Advisory Group (CAG) is a mechanism for involving communities’ participation in research, which is an ethical requirement. Research has shown that CAG is the catalyst for bridging gaps between communities’ dwellers and researchers. The Partnership for Research on Vaccines and Infectious Diseases in Liberia (PREVAIL), established in 2015 during the West African Ebola outbreak, has not utilized a CAG for community participation in its research activities; however, its Social Mobilization and Community Engagement (SMC) team recently established a CAG to support its ongoing and planned clinical research activities. This paper seeks to describe the establishment of the PREVAIL Community Advisory Group (P-CAG).

METHODS- The SMC team utilized 2 stakeholder engagement strategies in establishing the P-CAG: 1) advocacy meeting with civil society organization, religious, and traditional leaders; and health practitioners from the four counties (Montserado, Margibi, Bomi and Grand Cape Mount) in which PREVAIL operates to solicit buy-in for the establishment of the P-CAG; and 2) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with internal (PREVAIL STAFF) and external (community dwellers) stakeholders to solicit their input on the structure, roles and responsibilities, membership, selection, capacity building and sustainability of the P-CAG.

RESULTS- To establish the CAG, the SMC conducted 1 advocacy meeting and 12 FGDs with 134 participants. The P-CAG was established based upon the outcomes from the FGDs. After orientation and training on Good Participatory Practices for Biomedical Research, the P-CAG conducted their first meeting to develop their charter and first quarterly workplan. To date, they have reviewed one protocol for an upcoming Lassa Fever trial and provided feedback.

CONCLUSION- Establishment of a CAG requires advocacy, community consultations, efforts, and time. It is an essential step in bridging the gap between communities and researchers.