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Survivors of Liberia's War Recognized for Transforming Field of Mental Health

(Boston, MA December 16, 2009) Tiyatien Health, an organization founded by survivors of Liberia's civil war, has won the grand prize in a global competition seeking "the best solutions to improve mental health in communities around the world." Sponsored by Ashoka Foundation's *Changemakers* and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the "Rethinking Mental Health: Improving Community Wellbeing" competition drew over 340 submissions from 42 countries.

Liberia is one of the world's poorest war-torn countries. A brutal 14-year civil war has left it with 80% unemployment and only 50 doctors to serve a nation the size of Ohio.

Founded by survivors of the civil war in Zwedru, Liberia, and with offices in Boston, MA, Tiyatien Health (TH) advances healthcare and the fundamental rights of Liberia's rural poor. TH works with the Liberian government to strengthen public sector health services and reduce poverty in the remote dense forests of southeastern Liberia.

Selected for its "vision, impact and unique approach", Tiyatien Health's winning *Changemakers* submission -- a project dubbed "[Rebuilding Hope after War](#)" -- partners with the Liberian Ministry of Health to employ local residents as community health workers who team-up with mid-level clinicians to treat depression and epilepsy. TH trains non-physician clinicians in simplified, evidence-based protocols. Community health workers (CHWs) lead group counseling sessions and identify, monitor, and support patients on treatment. The Rebuilding Hope initiative serves over 100 patients at Tubman Hospital in Zwedru, Liberia.

"The CHWs provide an ideal solution to Liberia's triple threat of severe resource shortages, extreme deficits of trained health workers, and highly dispersed rural populations," said Dr. Pat Lee, a Harvard-based physician and Director of Tiyatien's Chronic Disease programs. "We will rigorously evaluate this mental health program as an effective solution for Liberia and a model for other rural, post-conflict settings."

TH's community-based strategy works to provide high-quality primary health care and promote job creation among the poor in rural Liberia. "Our model is effective because it is highly participatory", said Gideon Tenty, a former Liberian war refugee and community mental health

leader at Tiyatien Health. “Our programs are directly designed by the people served by them in collaboration with public health experts.”

“The *Changemakers* prize offers hope to Liberians suffering from the silent burden of depression and other mental health disorders,” said Dr. Amisha Raja, a VA-based expert in psychological treatment of war victims and co-founder of Tiyatien Health. In 2008, a landmark national study of 1666 households that Dr. Raja and TH helped organize uncovered that over 40% of Liberian adults suffer from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Three years ago, Ministry of Health leaders declared the lack of mental health services an emergency,” said Dr. Raj Panjabi, a Liberian-born, Harvard-trained physician and Executive Director at Tiyatien Health. “By bringing international recognition to this work, the Ashoka *Changemakers* prize honors the bold commitment of the Liberian government’s Mental Health Taskforce and its many partners who seek to close the mental health treatment gap.”

Tiyatien Health will receive \$5000 and its work will be highlighted on the Ashoka Foundation’s website, *Changemakers.com*, “where innovators, investors, and supporters come together to help refine and scale up the impact of the newest, best ideas for social change.”

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About Tiyatien Health

Founded in 2006 by survivors of Liberia’s civil war, together with American supporters, Tiyatien Health (TH) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based both in Liberia and Boston. TH partners with rural communities and the Liberian government to advance healthcare and the fundamental rights of the poor. Through services, training, research, and advocacy, we are working to improve access to HIV treatment, care, and support; pioneering models that deliver primary healthcare fairly and to remote areas; and bolstering social justice in rural Liberia.

TH’s projects are co-directed by an extensive network of global health specialists from a number of prominent universities, including Harvard and Johns Hopkins. Some of the world’s foremost global health experts, including Dr. Paul Farmer, the co-founder of Partners In Health, sit on its advisory board. Its community-based treatment strategies are being studied and adapted by the Global Fund, the Clinton Foundation, and the Liberian Ministry of Health. Learn more at <http://www.tiyatienhealth.org>.

About Ashoka’s Changemakers

Changemakers is an initiative of Ashoka, an organization with over three decades of finding, funding, and expanding the work of social entrepreneurs across the globe. It is a global online community of action that connects people to share ideas, inspire and mentor each other, and find and support the best ideas in social innovation. The *Changemakers* online community builds on this history and expands the Ashoka vision by creating an “Everyone a Changemaker” world through networking, relationship-building, and the sourcing of funding opportunities.

Through its collaborative competitions and open-source process, *Changemakers* has created one of the world’s most robust laboratories for launching, refining, and scaling ideas for solving the world’s most pressing social problems.