



# Assessing the Community Health Worker (CHW) Workforce at the State and Local Level

MAY 2021

Author

Meredith Sugarman, MPH

Contributors

Carl Rush, MRP

Theresa Mason, MA, PhD

Bernadine Mavhungu

The National Association of Community Health Workers (NACHW) unifies the voices of Community Health Workers to support communities in achieving health equity and social justice.

**NACHW**  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF  
COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

LEADERS IN  
COMMUNITY  
HEALTH

[www.nachw.org](http://www.nachw.org)

# Assessing the Community Health Worker (CHW) Workforce at the State and Local Level

The purpose of this report is to provide an example of the use of the NACHW CHW Document Resource Center<sup>1</sup> by describing current efforts and potential support available to state and local health departments, CHW professional organizations, and other stakeholders to measure and assess the CHW workforce. These efforts include activities such as identifying, enumerating, surveying, and profiling the workforce from the points of view of CHWs, employers, payers, and other stakeholders. The report includes examples from states with different approaches and provides citations to documents in the Resource Center with additional detail on each approach. Web links (URLs) are included in footnotes for cited references which are available directly on the Internet (or which are not in the Resource Center).

## Who are CHWs and what do they do?

A community health worker is:<sup>2</sup>

*“a frontline public health worker who is a trusted member of, and/or has an unusually close understanding of the community served. This trusting relationship enables the worker to serve as a liaison/link/intermediary between health/social services and the community to facilitate access to services and improve the quality and cultural competence of service delivery.*

*A [CHW] also builds individual and community capacity by increasing health knowledge and self-sufficiency through a range of activities such as outreach, community education,*

*informal counseling, social support and advocacy.”*

CHWs, including *promotoras/es de salud* in Spanish-speaking communities, and community health representatives in Native American tribal settings, work in a variety of settings including community-based organizations, social service agencies, health care provider systems, and local health departments. The workforce emerged as part of movements to strengthen access to and community involvement in health and other programs in communities with lower incomes and that were under-resourced.

To strengthen cohesion in and clarify the nature of the field, the CHW Core Competency (C3) Project<sup>3</sup> (2014 – 2018) aimed to identify a common set of roles, skills, and qualities across the CHW workforce. Most relevant to a discussion of workforce assessment is the range of CHW roles identified:

1. Cultural Mediation Among Individuals, Communities, and Health and Social Service Systems
2. Providing Culturally Appropriate Health Education and Information
3. Care Coordination, Case Management, and System Navigation
4. Providing Coaching and Social Support
5. Advocating for Individuals and Communities
6. Building Individual and Community Capacity
7. Providing Direct Service
8. Implementing Individual and Community Assessments
9. Conducting Outreach
10. Participating in Evaluation and Research

<sup>1</sup> <https://nachw.org/chw-document-resource-center/>

<sup>2</sup> American Public Health Association. (2009). *Support for Community Health Workers to Increase Health Access and to Reduce Health Inequities*. Retrieved from <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy->

[statements/policy-database/2014/07/09/14/19/support-for-community-health-workers-to-increase-health-access-and-to-reduce-health-inequities](https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2014/07/09/14/19/support-for-community-health-workers-to-increase-health-access-and-to-reduce-health-inequities)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.c3project.org/>

## History of CHW workforce assessment

The first formal national assessment of the CHW workforce was the National Community Health Advisor Study, published in 1998.<sup>4</sup> Since then, additional national projects, such as the 2007 Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) CHW National Workforce Study,<sup>5</sup> the C3 Project and the Common Indicators Project,<sup>6</sup> have sought to increase understanding and knowledge of the CHW workforce and identify commonalities across it. For example, the Common Indicators Project aims to define a set of “specific process and outcome indicators that can be used across CHW programs, regardless of setting and community” and “a larger set of process and outcome constructs that can be recommended for CHW research and evaluation nationally.”

## Using CHW workforce studies to inform policy

As states develop and implement policies related to CHW workforce development (e.g., certification, standardized training), assessing the CHW workforce is crucial, first to understand the current nature and status of the workforce, and then to monitor both positive changes and unintended consequences in workforce composition and needs as these policies are implemented.

Policy related to CHW workforce development is made at the state and local levels. Assessments of the workforce are also generally conducted at both these levels, focusing on CHWs and CHW employers. Topics for statewide CHW assessments have included: CHW roles and demographics,

types of employers/organizations, geographic locations, populations served, financing of CHW programs, experience with training, perspectives on standardized training and certification, and organizational support (supervision, pay, and benefits).<sup>7,8</sup>

## Approaches to assessing the CHW workforce: State examples

**Efforts to survey the workforce.** As a requirement of early health care reform legislation, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health surveyed the CHW workforce in 2008<sup>9</sup> to gather data on staffing, current activities of CHWs, populations served, salary & benefits, recruitment & retention, training for CHWs, impact of CHWs, and funding sources. The results of the survey were presented to the Massachusetts legislature in 2010 and informed the subsequent successful campaign to pass legislation that led to voluntary certification for the field.<sup>10</sup>

In 2014, the Michigan Community Health Worker Alliance, in partnership with the Michigan Department of Health & Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), launched their first workforce survey for CHW employers.<sup>8</sup> According to the 2014 Final Evaluation Report, the survey was designed to “gain a better understanding of the work CHWs are doing in Michigan, how CHWs and their programs are funded, and what kind of data CHW programs currently collect.”<sup>8</sup> Surveys of CHW employers have continued in Michigan every two years.<sup>11,12</sup>

Recently, additional states have conducted surveys to assess the workforce’s interest in developing standardized training or

<sup>4</sup> Rosenthal, E L. A Summary of the Community Health Advisor Study. 1998. <https://crh.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/publications/CAHsummaryALL.pdf> <https://bhwa.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bhw/nchwa/projections/communityhealthworkforce.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.michwa.org/common-indicators-project-2/>

<sup>7</sup> Massachusetts Department of Public Health. CHW Workforce Survey 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Michigan Community Health Worker Alliance. Community Health Worker Program Survey 2014: Final Evaluation Report for Public Use. 2015 <https://www.michwa.org/chw-employer-surveys/>

<sup>9</sup> Massachusetts Department of Public Health. CHW Workforce Survey 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Rosenthal EL, Wiggins N, Ingram M, Mayfield-Johnson S, Guernsey De Zapien J. Community Health Workers: Part Of The Solution. 2010.

<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/pdf/10.1377/hlthaff.2010.0081>

<sup>11</sup> Michigan Community Health Worker Alliance. Community Health Worker Employer Survey 2016: Final Evaluation Report for Public Use. 2016

<sup>12</sup> Michigan Community Health Worker Alliance. Community Health Worker Employer Survey 2018: Final Evaluation Report. 2018; 2020 EMPLOYER survey Executive Summary: [https://uploads-](https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/5ee3d9d8eaa3e8d5863dc3fc/5fae8ac5d6e0f56968679ca8_MICHWA_Employer_Survey_Executive_Summary_2020.pdf)

[ssl.webflow.com/5ee3d9d8eaa3e8d5863dc3fc/5fae8ac5d6e0f56968679ca8\\_MICHWA\\_Employer\\_Survey\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_2020.pdf](https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/5ee3d9d8eaa3e8d5863dc3fc/5fae8ac5d6e0f56968679ca8_MICHWA_Employer_Survey_Executive_Summary_2020.pdf)

certification policies, including Louisiana<sup>13</sup> and Rhode Island.<sup>14</sup>

### Environmental scans of the CHW

**landscape.** In Pennsylvania, the Community Health Worker Workforce Project included environmental scans as part of their project strategy, supported by the Pennsylvania Department of Health.<sup>15</sup> In 2013, a report to the Bureau of Health Promotion and Risk Reduction, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control was prepared by utilizing in-depth literature reviews and a corresponding survey of organizations that work with CHWs.<sup>16</sup> Then in 2017, The Center for Rural Pennsylvania conducted surveys, focus groups, and interviews with CHWs and supervisors and administrators specifically highlighting issues and challenges in rural health care.<sup>17</sup>

**Other recent surveys to inform policy.** The University of Arizona has surveyed Arizona health care providers to assess the impact of CHWs on primary care.<sup>18</sup> The Washington State Department of Health surveyed employers in 2015 specifically concerning CHW training needs.<sup>19</sup> The University of Texas conducted an online employer survey as part of a legislatively mandated workforce study in 2012.<sup>20</sup>

## Partnerships in CHW workforce assessment

There are often multiple partners involved in supporting CHW workforce assessment efforts. Stakeholders include state health departments, CHW professional organizations, health systems, community-based organizations, social service agencies, and primary care associations.<sup>21</sup> An example of one such partnership is the use of CDC 1815/1817 (previously 1305/1422) cooperative funding agreements in chronic disease by state health agencies, which have provided financial support for CHW workforce assessments in multiple states.

## Recommended practices in CHW workforce assessment

As assessment efforts expand across the U.S. in response to growing interest in the CHW workforce, challenges of surveying the workforce have, also been identified,<sup>22</sup> along with strategies to increase CHW engagement in assessment. One key element is promoting CHW leadership and involvement in the process of developing and administering assessments.<sup>23</sup> The American Public Health Association encourages all efforts at establishing standards for the workforce to include strong CHW leadership in the decision-making process.<sup>24</sup> Specific

<sup>13</sup> Barrow. Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 70. 2019.

<https://legiscan.com/LA/text/SCR70/id/2031984/Louisiana-2019-SCR70-Enrolled.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Alexander-Scott N, Garneau D, Dunklee B. Community Health Workers in Rhode Island: Growing a public health workforce for a healthier state. 2018. <https://health.ri.gov/publications/reports/CommunityHealthWorkersInRhodeIsland.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Community Health Worker Workforce Project. Project Strategy. 2015.

[https://nashp.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/PA\\_CHW\\_information\\_2\\_pages.pdf](https://nashp.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/PA_CHW_information_2_pages.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> The Alliance of Pennsylvania Councils, Inc. Environmental Scan of Community Health Workers (CHWs) in Pennsylvania. 2013.

<https://www.livehealthypa.com/docs/default-source/chw/pa-environmental-scan-of-community-health-workers.pdf?sfvrsn=0>

<sup>17</sup> Ardary D, DellAntonio J, Du Gan J, Granich S, Reitz L, Talbot A. Examination of Community Health Workers in Rural Pennsylvania. 2017.

<https://www.rural.palegislature.us/documents/reports/Community-Health-Workers-2017.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Arizona Prevention Research Center. Impact of Community Health Workers in Primary Care. Zuckerman College of Public Health, University of Arizona, June 30, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Washington State Department of Health. Community Health Worker Training Employer Survey [instrument]. 2015.

<sup>20</sup> University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, School of Public Health, Institute for Health Policy. Study on Employment of Promotoras/Community Health Workers (CHWs) as Mandated by Texas House Bill 2610. Appendix G: Employer Survey Development, Distribution, and Respondent Profile Report. San Antonio: UTSPH, August 7. 2012.

<sup>21</sup> National Association of Community Health Centers. State Policies and Strategies that Impact Community Health Workers at Health Centers Spotlight on States # 8. 2015. [http://www.nachc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Spotlight-8\\_CHW-State-Policies-FINAL.pdf](http://www.nachc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Spotlight-8_CHW-State-Policies-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5678391/>

<sup>23</sup> Sugarman M, Ezouah P, Haywood C, Wennerstrom A. Promoting Community Health Worker Leadership in Policy Development: Results from a Louisiana Workforce Study. J Community Health volume 46, pages 64–74(2021) <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10900-020-00843-7>

<sup>24</sup> American Public Health Association Policy 201414. Support for Community Health Worker Leadership in Determining Workforce Standards. Nov 18, 2014. <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2015/01/28/14/15/support-for-community-health-worker-leadership>



actions that stakeholders can take to promote CHW leadership and engagement:

- Formally acknowledging the leadership role of CHWs in shaping CHW workforce development,<sup>25,13</sup>
- Engaging CHWs in the development of statewide assessment tools and surveys,<sup>26</sup>
- Partnering with CHW professional associations in outreach and data collection,<sup>13</sup> and
- Consulting with and engaging CHWs and CHW professional associations on results dissemination to CHW audience.<sup>13</sup>

## In the database

Further information about measuring and assessing the workforce can be found within the NACHW CHW Document Resource Center. Relevant documents and content can be found under “Surveys and assessment tools to define and develop the workforce.” There are survey examples and reports on survey results from multiple states that could be useful to compare and consider when developing future surveys.

Additional resources can also be found in CDC’s “Job Aid” document, “Increasing Capacity to Engage and Sustain Community Health Workers in Diabetes Management and Type 2 Diabetes Prevention” (available in English and Spanish).<sup>27</sup> For additional CDC

CHW resources, visit the CDC CHW Resources Gateway.<sup>28</sup>

## Disclaimer statement

Development of this report and the NACHW Document Resource Center were supported by a cooperative agreement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors (5-NU38OT000286-02).

Facts and opinions expressed in documents on the NACHW Document Resource Center are solely those presented by the authors and publishers of those documents, and do not represent the views of CDC, National Association of Chronic Disease Directors or NACHW. Documents available for download as PDFs in the Resource Center are believed to be in the Public Domain. If any individual or organization claims copyright protection for a document, and they choose not to grant NACHW permission to offer that document to the public on this web site, NACHW will upon written request remove the PDF of that document from this site.

Website addresses of nonfederal organizations are provided solely as a service to our readers. Provision of an address does not constitute an endorsement by the CDC or the federal government, and none should be inferred. CDC is not responsible for the content of other organizations’ web pages.

**Visit the CHW Document Resource Center**

<https://nachw.org/chw-document-resource-center/>



<sup>25</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). Engaging the Community Health Worker (CHW) Workforce and Other Stakeholders. <https://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/pubs/toolkits/chw-ta-engaging.htm>. Accessed July 18, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Sabo, S, Allen, C. G, Sutkowi, K, Wennerstrom, A. (2017). Community Health Workers in the United States: Challenges in Identifying, Surveying,

and Supporting the Workforce. American Journal of Public Health, 107(12), 1964–1969. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304096>

<sup>27</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/pdfs/programs/stateandlocal/CHW\\_JobAid\\_508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/pdfs/programs/stateandlocal/CHW_JobAid_508.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/publichealthgateway/chw/index.html>