



# ISSUE BRIEF

## Collaborating with Community Health Workers to Enhance the Coordination of Care and Advance Health Equity

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## Introduction

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As part of health care teams, community health workers (CHWs) can be valuable resources for increasing the effectiveness of public health practitioners. CHWs are members of the community who serve as advocates and liaisons between the community and the health care and social service systems. They provide services that improve health care access and education to promote understanding of health problems and how to navigate the health care system. CHWs can provide informal counseling and perform minor clinical services, such as checking blood pressure in nonclinical settings. They can translate and promote understanding when patients receive health services. By integrating CHWs into health care teams, public health practitioners can better address health inequities in underserved communities where CHWs provide services.<sup>1, 4, 6</sup>

### **CHWs Offer Promise**

“Community health workers offer promise as a community-based resource to increase racial and ethnic minorities’ access to health care and to serve as a liaison between health care providers and the communities they serve.”<sup>1</sup>

This brief examines how CHWs can help address rising health care costs and poor health among underserved communities. It provides a detailed description of CHWs, their work settings, and the services that they provide. It offers guidance on how public health practitioners can collaborate with CHWs to enhance the coordination of health care and advance health equity. The summary statement discusses the importance of integrating CHWs into health care teams. To supplement the information provided, the brief also includes a list of resources such as tool kits and e-trainings.

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## Overview

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### **Description of the Issue**

In 2011, the United States spent an approximately \$8,680 per person on health care, for a total of \$2.7 trillion.<sup>2</sup> The cost of health care steadily increased from 4.2% in 2012 to 3.8% in 2013.<sup>3</sup> There are many reasons why health costs are continue to rise.

Contributing factors include poor management of chronic diseases, reliance on fee for services provided by clinicians in clinical or emergency hospital settings, lack of preventive care, and poor health status as result of lifestyle choices, such as smoking.



Members of racial and ethnic minorities and underserved communities generally experience poorer overall health status, lower levels of access to health care, and lower life expectancy than the general population. They are also burdened disproportionately by chronic disease. The higher burden of disease and lack of preventive care among minorities contributes to higher costs for health services.<sup>1</sup>

## How Community Health Workers Can Help Address these Issues

CHWs can help to reduce the demand on the health care system by conducting outreach and prevention education, coordinating care, improving patient communication and compliance, and facilitating early diagnosis in underserved communities.<sup>4</sup>

Communities can support preventive services in clinical settings with community-based prevention programs. Community-based clinical services connect health providers, such as physicians to other available services such as a community education program that teaches how to manage health problems.

The involvement of CHWs in preventive health services benefits communities by overcoming and reducing cultural and other barriers to services. CHWs also promote the use of health services and encourage people to adopt healthier lifestyles. CHWs add services for a more diverse health care workforce and serve as a link between clinical services and social services. Other advantages of CHWs are that they can provide services outside of traditional clinical settings and improve understanding of services for patients.<sup>5</sup>

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## Who Are Community Health Workers?

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In 2000, a study indicated nearly 86,000 CHWs supported communities throughout the United States.<sup>4</sup> CHWs can be paid or volunteer community members. They bridge the sociocultural gap between individuals, communities, social services, and the local health care system. They work in urban and rural settings and usually share the ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, and life experiences with the members of the communities who they serve.<sup>4</sup>

CHWs are trusted members of their communities. They have many job titles, including lay health advocates, advisors or partners, patient navigators, ambassadors, self-management coaches, outreach educators or workers, peer health advisors or promoters, peer leaders or counselors, community health advisors or representatives. In Spanish they are called promotoras or promotores de salud (health promoters), and navigator promotoras or navegadores para pacientes.<sup>1, 4, 6, 8</sup>

CHWs strengthen existing community ties and are uniquely qualified to serve as liaisons because they usually live in or work in the community they serve. They share and understand their community's language, cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, traditional health practices, and experiences with health care. They serve as connectors between communities and health care and social service agencies with the goal of improving understanding of services by the patient and cultural competency by the service providers.<sup>8, 9</sup> They can promote and provide preventative practices like controlling blood pressure, that result in better health outcomes in the community.<sup>11, 12</sup>

CHWs can guide patients on how to access appropriate services to avoid preventable hospitalizations or other expensive care resulting from chronic disease and poor lifestyle choices.<sup>7</sup> The ability of CHWs to have an effect on the health of people and enhance their quality of life in the communities they serve

has been recognized for many health concerns (e.g., asthma, cancer, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, hypertension, immunization, maternal and child health, nutrition, and tuberculosis).<sup>8</sup>

### ***CHW Work Sectors, Roles, and Responsibilities***

See the following resources for information on CHW sectors, roles, responsibilities, and sustainability:

- [Health Resources and Services Administration's Community Health Workers Evidence-Based Models Toolbox](#)<sup>6</sup>
- [US Department of Labor's Standard Occupational Classification for CHWs](#)<sup>10</sup>

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## **How Can Public Health Practitioners Collaborate with Community Health Workers?**

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Public health practitioners can collaborate with CHWs individually, in coalitions, or in health care teams to enhance the coordination of care within the health care system and social services. Collaborating with CHWs will improve the delivery of prevention and related services and links patients to community resources.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Partnering with CHWs to Enhance the Coordination of Care***

Public health practitioners, in collaboration with CHWs, can improve health outcomes by:

#### **Providing support and counseling**

- Linking patients with key support services
- Helping patients' understand and address behavioral and social risks to their health
- Providing community outreach in needed areas

#### **Addressing barriers and increasing use of services by**

- Translating when language is a barrier
- Providing referrals for needed services
- Helping patients understand, in plain language, instructions from health care providers
- Assisting with lack of transportation, completing required paperwork, or other barriers

#### **Establishing connections and providing education**

- Identifying more accessible and affordable care for patients
- Improving health care providers understanding of community needs and culture
- Building capacity of the people and their communities to improve health outcomes
- Providing health education that is targeted to community needs

#### **Strengthening care**

- Contributing to the continuity and coordination of care
- Improving self-management of care between physician visits
- Providing direct health care services, such as basic first aid and conducting health screenings
- Assisting patients with attending appointments and adhering to medication regimens<sup>1, 7, 8, 13</sup>

### ***Advancing Health Equity***

The Health and Human Services (HHS) Action Plan to Reduce Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities<sup>15</sup> shows support for CHWs, particularly in diverse and underserved communities.<sup>8, 14</sup> HHS strives to help all Americans have access to quality affordable health care and to control costs within the health care system.<sup>15</sup> There is funding available to promote healthy behaviors and outcomes for populations in medically underserved communities through the use of community health workers.<sup>8, 14</sup>



### ***Partnering with CHWs to Advance Health Equity***

Public health practitioners can partner with CHWs to help provide underserved populations with greater access to health care in the following ways:

- Provide culturally appropriate community health education
- Promote awareness and understanding of health care disparities
- Mediate health care between providers and the community
- Educate health care providers about the health needs of the community and the cultural relevancy of interventions
- Improve cultural competency within the health care system
- Strengthen communication skills of providers and health care system administrators<sup>7, 16</sup>

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## **Summary**

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The process of transforming communities to support and improve their health and quality of life is an important function of public health and the health care system. CHWs can be a valuable resource for public health practitioners to increase the effectiveness of efforts in clinical and community preventive services. The services that CHWs provide vary from community to community. They may be volunteers or trained full-time employees whose goals are to enhance the coordination of care and advance health equity in underserved communities. CHWs foster linkages between the community and the health care and social services systems to provide underserved populations with increased access to culturally competent services. Integrating CHWs into health care teams is a proven option for public health practitioners to consider when working with underserved communities.

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## **Additional Resources**

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### **[American Public Health Association Community Health Worker Section](#)**

- Web site provides information for and about CHWs



**Community Health Workers: Massachusetts Health Care Workforce Center**

- Web site offers information for and about CHWs, including information on what they do and the programs and services they provide, reports and resources describing their work, and links to a number of state- and national-based resources.

**HRSA Community Health Workers National Workforce Study, 2007**

This report is a comprehensive national study of the CHWs workforce and of the factors that affect its utilization and development.

**Massachusetts Association of Community Health Workers**

- Web site serves professional CHWs from all disciplines and provides tools to help organize, define, and strengthen the profession; includes information on policy, resources, publications, and training opportunities.

**National Partnership for Action to End Health Disparities: Toolkit for Community Action**

- The toolkit examines the issue of health disparities. It provides information how individuals and organizations can develop solutions for change and tools to help address health disparities in communities.

**Promoting Policy and Systems Change to Expand Employment of Community Health Workers**

- A CDC online course for provide state programs consists of six sessions about CHWs. The course includes information on how states can engage in policy and systems change efforts to establish sustainability in funding and programs for CHWs.

**Rural Assistance Center: Community Health Workers Toolkit**

- The toolkit helps to evaluate opportunities for developing a CHW program and provides resources and best practices.

**Training Curriculum for Community Health Workers**

- The Training Curriculum is a manual from Washington State's online Community Health Worker Training System.

**USAID Health Care Improvement Project: Community Health Worker Assessment and Improvement Matrix (CHW AIM): A Toolkit for Improving CHW Programs and Services**

- This resource helps ministries, donors, and nongovernmental organizations assess and strengthen their CHW programs.

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

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