

Development of National Standards for Organizations That Employ Community Health Workers

Project Fact Sheet

Project Overview

Community health workers (CHW) provide personalized, culturally respectful care to individuals and families to help address social determinants of health and improve health equity. As the CHW workforce grows, organizations that employ, contract or partner with CHWs may not know how best to support and elevate their work caring for the communities they serve.

In partnership with Penn Center for Community Health Workers and with support from the Commonwealth Fund and the Community Health Acceleration Partnership, NCQA is developing national standards on program elements that support CHWs' work to provide high-quality care to the communities they serve. These standards can be used by employers, states and other payers to help sustain the CHW workforce and help organizations that hire or partner with CHWs to be recognized as a valuable part of health care and social service systems.

Key Terms

This project defines community health workers based on the definition from the American Public Health Association, Community Health Worker Section.

“A community health worker is 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 community health worker 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.”

A CHW is someone with trust-building traits such as empathy and open-mindedness, who has shared lived experiences with the people they serve, and can provide tailored socioeconomic support, advocacy, life coaching, and navigation. They may go by different names including promotores, doulas, community health representatives, peer navigators, among others.

System-level standards will be developed for community health worker programs that include programs and organizations that hire, employ, contract or partner with CHWs to provide care.

Standards are a roadmap to help organizations implement supportive infrastructures, policies and procedures that can lead to high-quality care. Standards are linked to better quality and better outcomes and are based on expert consensus (i.e., lived experience) and best practices (i.e., scientific evidence). They are surveyable and consistent with existing laws and policies. Standards seek to push the industry toward a desired goal.

Standard Development Process

The project team embraces the concept of CHW self-determination for workforce and uses a grassroots approach to ensure inclusion of multiple stakeholders during the standard development process. The development process entails input from three key sources:

1. Multi-Stakeholder Steering Committee: The committee is comprised of over 50% current or former CHWs (n=7); and the other individuals (n=5) have expertise working with CHWs or on CHW programs in different settings, such as community-based organizations, academic institutions, and state Medicaid programs. The committee will meet three times throughout the project to provide advice from diverse perspectives.
2. “Call for Input” Listening Sessions: Virtual meetings were conducted at the early stages of the development process to gather input from key stakeholder groups, including CHWs, community-based organizations, health care organizations, health plans, researchers and government officials.
3. Environmental Scan: Comprehensive scan was performed to review existing literature on CHW program guidelines and best practices.

This project will culminate in spring 2021 with a draft set of national standards. A summary of key areas of high and low agreement will also be published in a white paper. Input from the steering committee, listening sessions and the environmental scan will inform the draft standards and white paper.

If you have questions about this project, please email CHWProgramStandards@ncqa.org.