



Community Health Workers: An Overview

What is a Community Health Worker?

A community health worker (CHW) 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 CHW 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.¹

What do Community Health Workers do?

The essential scope of work for a CHW is primary healthcare prevention and control of chronic disease among underserved populations. Their seven core roles are bridging cultural mediation between communities and the health care system, providing culturally appropriate and accessible health education and information (often by using popular education methods), ensuring that people get the services they need, providing informal counseling and social support, advocating for individuals and communities, providing direct services (such as basic first aid) and administering health screening tests, building individual and community capacity.¹

Why should anyone be interested in Community Health Workers?

CHWs are uniquely qualified in utilizing community network ties to improve health and access to healthcare. They live in the communities in which they work, understand what is meaningful to those communities, communicate in the language of the people, and recognize and incorporate cultural buffers (e.g., cultural identity, spiritual coping, traditional health practices) to help community members cope with stress and promote health outcomes². These unique insights into the community they serve allow CHWs to reach populations often missed by traditional healthcare services. CHWs are an integral resource at a time when chronic diseases are increasing in the United States and the healthcare system becomes harder to navigate.

What kind of training is needed to become a Community Health Worker?

Educational backgrounds vary among CHWs, ranging from some on-the-job training to formal community college-based programs that grant certification or an associate's degree. The National Workforce Study (NWS) found that 21% of CHW programs required a high school diploma or GED and 32% required a bachelor's degree.³ Educational requirements for CHWs differ between CHW programs according to the community and need being addressed by the program and the specific scope of work for CHWs in that program. There is currently no national standard for CHW training or professional certification. Some states mandate specific credentials for CHWs, but most do not.¹ The Nevada Division of Public and Behavioral Health (NDPBH) is currently working with the Nevada System of Higher Education to create a standardized curriculum for CHWs to start CHW training and certification programs in community colleges around the state.

¹ Wiggins N, Borbon A. 1998. Core roles and competencies of community health advisors (Chapter 3). The National Community Health Advisor Study: Weaving the Future. Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press (410-223-2890).

² Walters KL, Simoni JM. (2002). Reconceptualizing native women's health: An "indigenous" stress-coping model External Web Site Icon. Am J Public Health 92, 520-524.

³ Scott, G. and Wilson, R. (2006). Community Health Worker Advancement: A Research Summary. Skillworks. Jobs for the Future.



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Who hires Community Health Workers after they are trained?

- * Community Health Centers
- * Hospitals
- * Managed Care Organizations
- * Specialty Vendors to States:
 - Medicaid Enrollment
 - Chronic Disease Management
- * Non-Health Care Agencies
 - Early Childhood Education (Head Start)
 - Parenting and child abuse prevention
 - Emergency preparedness programs
 - Services for formerly incarcerated individuals and families affected
 - Employee benefits programs in large companies or institutions⁴

What is the pay scale for a Community Health Worker?

CHW salaries vary depending on local economies, wage scales and demand. According to a May 2012 report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the mean hourly wage for CHWs in the United States is \$18.02 for an annual mean wage of \$37,490 and the mean hourly wage in Nevada is \$24.62 for an annual wage of \$51,200. The current CHW pilot project at the NDPBH provides an hourly wage of \$12.00 for an annual wage of \$25,000. It should be noted that though the BLS has created a Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) for CHWs in 2010, separating them from health educators, the SOC is still not broken out separately in 2012 publications and reports. This could affect the statistics from the BLS, particularly the wage data, as health educators generally make more than CHWs.

What options are available for Community Health Workers on the career ladder?

CHWs can move into supervisory or managerial positions within their CHW program with correlating increases in pay. Other CHWs elect to transfer the skills they learned as a CHW during training and while on-the-job to another career within the healthcare field or in other public health programs.⁵

What mechanisms are in place for reimbursement of Community Health Worker services?

Though there are currently no active reimbursement avenues in place, a new rule from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services will allow state Medicaid agencies to reimburse for preventive services provided by professionals that may fall outside of a state's clinical licensure system as long as the services have been initially recommended by a physician or other licensed practitioner. The new rule for the first time offers state Medicaid agencies the option to reimburse for more community-based preventive services, including those of CHWs. The rule goes into effect on January 1, 2014.⁶ The NDPBH is currently working to make CHWs a recognized profession in Nevada, which will aid in the creation of further state-level reimbursement mechanism.

⁴ CDC, Promoting Policy and Systems Change to Expand Employment of Community Health Workers, http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsdp/pubs/chw_elearning.htm

⁵ ExploreHealthCareers.org. (2013). Community Health Worker. Overview. http://explorehealthcareers.org/en/Career/157/Community_Health_Worker

⁶ Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. (2013). 78 Fed Reg 42160. a. Diagnostic, Screening, Preventive, and Rehabilitative Services (Preventive Services) (§ 440.130)