

Recruiting, Hiring, Training, and Retaining Community Health Workers

Community Health Workers (CHWs) are trained and trusted to promote health in their communities., Community based organizations (CBOs) are one of the main employers of CHWs, but with growing interest from health care providers, CBOs are in a position to grow their CHW programs.

Prepare Your Staff for New CHWs to Come Onboard

Before hiring CHWs, all staff should understand that CHWs are hired for their *life experience* and *existing trust* within the communities they serve. While CHWs may have college degrees, these are not the primary credentials for which they are hired.

Build staff awareness in advance through presentations and reading about the history and current status of the CHW profession. Ideally, presentations should be done by experienced CHWs. Most states now have CHW associations that can provide written information and presentations.

Recruiting and Hiring: Where Can You Find CHWs?

The best way to find potential CHWs is by reaching out via word of mouth to your members/clients. Use social media and put up flyers in laundromats, grocery stores, and faith communities – any place community members gather.

As well as being community members, excellent CHWs possess certain characteristics. Look for the following 18 traits first identified in the 1998 National Community Health Advisor Study:

- Friendliness/sociability
- Patience
- Open-mindedness
- Initiative/motivation
- Caring
- Empathetic
- Commitment/dedication
- Respectfulness
- Honesty
- Desire and ability to grow, change and learn
- Dependability
- Compassion
- Flexibility
- Desire to help people/ the community
- Persistence
- Creativity

To assess these qualities, try non-conventional interview techniques—such as scenarios and role plays—which allow you to see how they are likely to react in real life.

Training CHWs

Increasingly, centralized programs provide training to CHWs from around a geographic region, often leading to state certification. State CHW associations can be great sources of information about what is available in your area. Like all professionals, CHWs need both *initial training* to prepare them for their work, and *ongoing training* to help them grow in their chosen field.

Best practices:

- Include both skill development and training on health issues;
- The training philosophy and methodology should be informed by popular education that builds on what people already know;
- Experienced CHWs should be involved in designing and conducting CHW training; and
- CHWs should be prepared and supported to play a full range of roles, from connecting people to services, to providing health education, to organizing communities to address their needs.

Retention: Hold On To Your CHWs

Living wage jobs with opportunities for advancement

In the past, CHW positions have been volunteer or low paying, with few opportunities for advancement. Salaries for CHWs should be based on the complex nature of their work, rather than on their level of formal education. As their skills and experience grow, CHWs need opportunities to move to positions of increasing responsibility and compensation.

Reflective and trauma-informed supervision

Many CHWs have experienced historical trauma. In their work, they are frequently exposed to secondary trauma, which can lead to stress and burnout. That's why it is important to provide CHWs with trauma-informed and reflective supervision by someone who understands the CHW role – ideally, an experienced CHW. Supervisors also need training and support to be effective in their roles. Local schools of social work can be good sources of training on reflective and trauma-informed supervision.

CHWs Working within Health Systems

Increasing awareness within health care systems of the way social conditions affect health – also known as the social determinants of health (SDOH) – has led to increasing interest in the role of CHW in helping to achieve better health, better care and lower costs. CHWs have always addressed SDOH by helping individuals meet their basic needs, and by organizing communities to identify and solve their most pressing health issues.

Key points that CBOs can emphasize when marketing CHW services to health systems:

- CBOs often have strong existing relationships with community members
- CHWs employed by culturally specific CBOs are supported in maintaining cultural approaches, rather than assimilating into dominant health services culture;
- CBOs can provide reflective and trauma-informed supervision, often from supervisors who share the CHWs' culture and life experience; and
- CBOs can save health systems money by conducting culturally specific recruitment and hiring and dealing with performance concerns, thus providing a more stable workforce.