

Kansas Community Health Workers

This profession increases access to clinical and community-based services, helping to reduce health disparities and the cost of care.

CHW ROLE

Community health workers (CHWs) are community members trained to work with the local health care and social services systems to bridge the gap between these systems and their clients.

CHWs are also referred to as: health navigator, promotor(a), advocate, and educator

Their work ensures clients receive access to needed health, social and community services. Unlike many members of the health care team, CHWs are often seen beyond the walls of health care facilities, working in the community, and even making house calls. Community health workers can serve as the eyes and ears of the health care team.

Not everyone has equitable access to health care and social services. These systems are complex and can be incredibly difficult to navigate. CHWs benefit many populations who may otherwise not have equitable or adequate access to care or who may rely solely on emergency care, such as:

- Individuals with low or no income
- Communities of color
- Immigrants
- Individuals with language barriers
- Patients with chronic conditions
- Individuals in crisis
- Individuals without local support systems

Kansas CHWs use a combination of skills and knowledge to connect individuals to the information and services that will lead to optimal health outcomes. CHWs can have many roles and responsibilities:

- **Client Support:** CHWs provide encouragement and social supports to assist clients with setting goals and identifying barriers.

“One of my first referrals was a 23-year-old, obstetric patient, mother of two. The client had

no insurance and was considering cancelling her ultrasound appointment as she didn’t have the money to pay for it. During the enrollment process, I found she had numerous goals we could work on together. Many goals were met: applying for Medicaid, SNAP, WIC, moving from an unsafe apartment to subsidized housing, obtaining a library card for internet access, enrolling in the adult learning center ... It’s so rewarding to see how well this client is doing since her discharge.”

-Lucy Watie, former CHW, Bob Wilson Hospital, Ulysses

- **Care Coordination:** CHWs assist in organizing care instructions across a client’s health care team and connecting clients to appropriate information and services.

“I helped a patient with stage 4 cancer through the paperwork process to get his part-time caregiver paid. Ultimately, his caregiver support increased, which allowed the patient to have assistance with household chores, shopping, transportation to and from appointments, etc.”

-Stephanie Goetz, Salina Family Healthcare Center

HOW KANSAS CHWS DEFINE THEMSELVES

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 knowledge and self-sufficiency through a range of activities such as outreach, community education, informal counseling, social support, and advocacy.¹

-Definition adopted by the Kansas Community Health Worker Coalition

- **Healthcare Liaison:** CHWs are often from the communities they serve, which gives them a unique understanding of their clients' needs and barriers to care. CHWs serve as culturally informed liaisons between clients, community, and health care systems.

"This month, I had a client go to Lifeline four times to try and get on their phone program. She was denied every time...I had the client send me copies of all her supporting documents and I went on her behalf. I was there for 2 hours and was denied.

When I called to file a grievance on behalf of the client, it was explained that the client was denied the DCF program because her DCF benefit letter was in Spanish. This did not make sense because DCF gives this as an option when clients apply. The worker was able to approve the client's application on the spot."

-Suzana Hernandez, CHW, Sedgwick County Health Department

- **Health Education:** Community health workers provide culturally relevant health education to individuals, organizations and/or communities, in an effort to reduce risk factors and encourage healthy behaviors. Community health workers help patients develop strategies to manage their chronic conditions so that they can live healthier lives.

"A lot of times people with chronic conditions don't actually feel bad...high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or even diabetes, often you feel fine. It's confusing sometimes as to 'Why do I have to take this medication every day when I feel fine?' or 'Why do I have to go to the doctor three or four times a year?'...Community health workers can help a lot with the education and help people understand why those things are important."

-Dennis Dunmyer, COO, KC Care Health Center

- **Advocacy:** Community health workers recognize gaps that prevent client health, and advocate for individual and community health needs.

IMPORTANCE

- Research finds integrating CHWs into a client's care team results in better and more appropriate access to health care, improves health outcomes and addresses gaps and equity issues in our fragmented health care system. Integration has also delivered strong return on investment for providers and the overall health system.²
- CHWs' work addresses the social determinants of health and directly impacts health outcomes for those facing health disparities.
- CHWs improve health outcomes for rural and immigrant people. They help to make health care and other services more accessible by reducing language, transportation, and technological barriers.³
- Community health workers are trusted members from the communities that they serve. This is key to them providing culturally competent health education and support, which helps them address racial health disparities in largely segregated communities.⁴

STRENGTHS

- **Return on Investment:** CHWs represent a low-cost approach by altering their clients' use of high-cost services, like the emergency room and supports. By educating clients on alternative options that are more appropriate to the level of care needed, CHWs can reduce the burden on overworked staff and save the organization and the system unnecessary costs.

"This is achieved by reducing emergency care use, providing more regular access to primary care and reducing hospital readmissions."

-Karen Braman, Senior Vice President of Kansas Hospital Association

A 2020 study at Penn Medicine found each dollar invested in its CHW program would have a \$2.47 return on investment to an average Medicaid payer within the fiscal year.⁵

- **Health Outcomes:** Research shows that when CHWs work with clients and patients, their physical or mental health improves.⁶
- **Health Care Accessibility:** Accessing health care can be a challenging and overwhelming process. CHWs act as a bridge to the formal health care system for their communities, especially for individuals who often avoid preventive and routine care or only access health care for emergencies.

OPPORTUNITIES

- **Certification:** In 2022, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment announced a formal certification program for CHWs, further defining the career path for the CHW profession.
- **Sustainable Financing:** Currently, CHW positions are largely dependent on grant funding, which is not sustainable for the long term. Exploring more sustainable funding through sources such as Medicaid/Medicare, service reimbursement, value-based payment options, and other partnerships will be important going forward.

HEAR MORE CHW STORIES

FOOTNOTES

1. "Community Health Workers," American Public Health Association, last modified 2021, <https://www.apha.org/apha-communities/member-sections/community-health-workers>.
2. United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, Strengths, Challenges, & Opportunities for Kansas Community Health Workers (Hutchinson, KS: January 2021).
3. RI Loga and H. Castañeda. Addressing Health Disparities in the Rural United States: Advocacy as Caregiving among Community Health Workers and Promotores de Salud. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2020 Dec 10;17(24):9223. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17249223. PMID: 33321718; PMCID: PMC7764816.
4. Kiana Chan. "Leaders in Reducing Racial Health Disparities: Community Health Workers," Columbia Mailman School of Public Health, January 19, 2021, <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/leaders-reducing-racial-health-disparities-community-health-workers>.
5. Penn Medicine News, "Penn's Community Health Worker Program Yields \$2.47 for Every \$1 Invested Annually by Medicaid," news release, February 7, 2020, <https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-releases/2020/february/penns-community-health-worker-program-yields-247-for-every-1-invested-annually-by-medicare>.
6. Shreya Kangovi, Nandita Mitra, David Grande, Hairong Huo, Robyn A. Smith, and Judith A. Long, "Community Health Worker Support for Disadvantaged Patients With Multiple Chronic Diseases: A Randomized Clinical Trial," *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no.10, (October 1, 2017): pp.1660-1667.