



COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

Community health workers—local residents who help others in the neighborhood access good health care—increase local adoption of medical practices from mammograms to children’s vaccinations.

The federal government has taken measures recently to increase access to important preventive health care services, but many people still face barriers that limit preventive health care, especially poor and minority individuals and families.¹ Many of the barriers to receiving good health care are not financial, including inability to access care when needed, transportation limitations, literacy problems, and language and cultural differences with providers.²

Community health workers are one solution to helping more families and individuals get regular preventive health care, which has been shown to have a strong effect on public health.

Also known as community health advisors, lay health advocates, *promotores* and peer health educators,³ community health workers are typically paid or volunteer members of the community in which they serve. They

provide a variety of services to increase access to and utilization of health care, including interpretation and translation services, health education and counseling, and some basic direct health care services.⁴

Because they often are local residents with similar demographic characteristics, language and life experiences as the individuals and communities with whom they work, community health advisors are able to have a different relationship than other medical personnel.

According to a 2007 report by the World Health Organization, “[Community health workers] can make a valuable contribution to community development and, more specifically, can improve access to and coverage of communities with basic health services. There is robust evidence that CHWs can undertake actions that lead to improved health outcomes, especially, but not exclusively, in the field of child health.”⁵

Community health workers help keep people healthy

Interventions that use community health workers are successful in improving health outcomes for several of the most effective clinical preventive services in the United States, including pediatric immunizations, prenatal care and management of diabetes.⁶

- A randomized controlled trial on the effectiveness of an outreach program found that children who were *not* engaged by community outreach workers were nearly three times more likely to receive pediatric vaccinations late when compared to children who were engaged by the workers.⁷
- Community health workers have been effective in helping individuals with hypertension attend scheduled medical appointments, adhere to their medications and control their blood pressure.⁸
- Community health workers have been found to help increase the use of health care services for other important clinical preventive services as well, including screenings for several types of cancer.⁹
- In a study where community health workers trained hair salon stylists on how to provide education, counseling and information on breast cancer screening services, clients at the salon who received the information were 60 percent more likely to conduct breast self-examination and were 90 percent more likely to express their intent to have a clinical breast examination compared to other clients.¹⁰
- Rural, medically underserved women in an intervention study who received information from fellow church members who had been trained as community health workers were four times more likely to have had one or more mammograms, compared to similar women in nearby counties.¹¹
- An intervention for African Americans with a family history of the coronary heart disease found that individuals who worked with a community health worker were twice as likely as individuals in the comparison group to lower their blood pressure and LDL cholesterol levels. They also were nearly twice as likely to increase their use of antihypertensive medication over the course of a year.¹²

Community health workers have a stamp of approval

Community health workers have been an effective part of medical care in low-income communities around the world for more than 50 years.¹³ Health care organizations in the United States and internationally have given community health worker programs their approval.

- Community health workers are recognized by the Institute of Medicine and by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for their effectiveness in supporting the prevention and control of chronic disease, including hypertension, diabetes and cancer.¹⁴
- In a recently published review of more than 50 academic studies of the effectiveness of community health worker interventions, the authors found evidence that community health workers can improve health outcomes for underserved populations for some health conditions.¹⁵

Note that community health workers alone are not sufficient to provide medical care to a community. The workers must be carefully selected and trained, and their impact is greatest when they are embedded in a mobilized community and provided with the necessary resources to do their job well.¹⁶

This Research Overview is part of a series that summarizes academic studies on the relationship between community development and health, education, and other aspects of community well-being.

For more information on these health studies and others, visit www.instituteccd.org/health.

ENDNOTES

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