

Building the Community Health Worker Field through Partnership and Innovation

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Minnesota is home to the country's largest Somali and second-largest Hmong populations and has significant numbers of immigrants from Central and South America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. It is also home to the largest urban population of Native Americans. With many cultures come many different beliefs on health and illness, and treatment and prevention options.

While Minnesota generally ranks as one of the healthiest states in the nation, people of color, foreign-born individuals, and those living in poverty typically experience poorer health than the native-born white population. The causes of these disparities are complex and intertwined, and include access to quality care, language barriers, housing and environmental conditions, and individual and collective historical experience with the health care system.

Ten years ago the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation began to look for community-based approaches to close the gap on health inequities. We identified support for community health workers (CHWs) and the sustainable development of the field as one path to healthier communities. Since then, we have invested in research, grantmaking, and partnerships to build the field.

A DECADE OF PARTNERSHIP AND IMPACT

Many partners have contributed to the development of the CHW field in Minnesota over the last decade. They include educators and academic institutions, the health care sector, health plans, public and private agencies, funders, policymakers, researchers, and CHWs themselves. Their contributions have included the creation of partnerships and coalitions, as well as individual efforts.

The foundation has served as a catalyst, providing funding that has resulted in impressive concrete outcomes, including:

► *Training, Curriculum, Peer Learning*

- Development of professional standards for CHWs, defining their role in the health care delivery system.
- Development of a standardized curriculum and a 14-credit CHW certificate program to educate CHWs in Minnesota. The statewide program, the first of its kind

nationally, combines classroom learning, field work, and internships in a standardized CHW curriculum. Next steps call for distance learning through I-TV, as well as on-line training.

- Provision of CHW training to over 350 students who received certificates that make their services eligible for medical assistance payment. Minnesota is one of only two states to reimburse CHWs under the Medicaid program.
- Development of specialized training in oral and mental health for CHWs.
- Provision of scholarships to support participation in CHW training.
- Creation of the first statewide CHW Peer Network to provide opportunities for peer learning and professional development. Future plans include expanded outreach, career development, and leadership activities.

► *Workforce Development and Job Creation*

- Formation of the Minnesota CHW Alliance, formerly the Minnesota CHW Policy Council, a workforce development partnership.
- Creation of new jobs for community health workers.
- Growing understanding among health care providers that CHWs are important members of a multidisciplinary team and can enhance services for diverse clients.

► *Research and Legislation for Sustainable Financing*

- Research on outcomes, cost effectiveness, and sustainability.
- Passage of landmark Minnesota legislation authorizing medical assistance payment for CHWs.
- A study recently published in *Health Affairs* examined the policy and systems change initiatives of a number of states working to integrate CHWs into service delivery teams and use CHWs to help eliminate health disparities. The study offers recommendations for comprehensive state legislation and cites the approaches of Massachusetts and Minnesota as models for other states seeking to eliminate

health disparities (Rosenthal et al. 2010).

► *Awareness and Public Support*

- Creation and use of tools and strategies to build awareness and support, including a public television program and DVD (in English, Somali, Spanish, and Hmong) on CHWs, communications, and convenings.
- A growing appreciation for the role CHWs play in increasing access to health care coverage, improving the quality and cost effectiveness of care, enhancing health, and increasing the diversity of the health care workforce.

LOOKING AHEAD

For those looking to enhance the credibility of the field and ensure that CHWs contribute to the health of Minnesota's communities to their fullest potential, some challenges lie ahead. These challenges include full integration of CHWs in the health care field; clarifying their roles, responsibilities, and competencies; demonstrating the impact of investments in CHWs on patient outcomes; making the case for sustainable funding mechanisms; recruitment; training; ongoing professional development; and retention.

Recent promising developments include:

- A national conference, supported by Minnesota's Healthcare Education-Industry Partnership and a consortium of researchers, funders, and others, proposed a research agenda and other recommendations to strengthen the evidence base for CHWs.
- On the national level, a membership organization known as the American Association for Community Health Workers was formed.
- The U.S. Department of Labor created a classification code for CHWs in 2009. This will enable better collection of workforce data, including the number of existing CHWs.
- The National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities, a division of the National Institutes of Health, targeted a portion of its American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds to support research on CHW training.
- The Children's Health Insurance Program, reauthorized in 2009, recognizes CHWs as providers of outreach, enrollment, and education.
- Federal funds support Centers for Medicare and Medicaid CHW demonstrations, and pilots, and now under the 2010 health care reform legislation include grants by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to promote healthy behaviors among medically underserved populations through the use of CHWs.

NEXT STEPS FOR THE BLUE CROSS FOUNDATION

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation is encouraged by the success of building the CHW field in Minnesota. But we know the work is not over. As health

care reform efforts move forward, we will continue to partner with others to promote awareness, understanding, and support of the CHW role and to document outcomes, costs, and benefits.

Future goals include increasing the number of curriculum sites, enhancing placement services and career counseling, and providing opportunities for distance learning. In particular, the foundation will explore opportunities to better integrate CHWs into the health care system, sustain CHW models based in social service and community settings, and support next-stage policy work and innovative partnerships that advance the field.

TAKING ACTION: WHAT FUNDERS CAN DO

- Provide financial support to help health providers, social service agencies, and other nonprofits serving ethnically and racially diverse populations incorporate community health workers into their programs.
- Support coordinated statewide systems of CHW training, including scholarships that reflect lessons from Minnesota and other states.
- Understand that funders involved in a variety of issues – early childhood, youth development, seniors, immigrants, environment, community development, healthy and/or supportive housing, workforce development, regional equity, poverty reduction, health, and health care – can support the CHW field.
- Raise awareness of the CHW role as a career track and pathway into the health care professions.
- Support ongoing rigorous research, demonstration, and evaluation that identify success factors in clinics and outcomes in clinics and community-based settings to provide evidence of impact and cost reduction.
- Focus on policy and systems change for broad impact.

We are proud of the work that has been done over the past 10 years and are pleased to share the report *Community Health Workers in Minnesota: Bridging Barriers, Expanding Access, Improving Health* that provides a comprehensive look at the project, and features the partners, additional resources, as well as model legislation. It can be accessed at www.bcbsmnfoundation.org.

SOURCES

Rosenthal, E. Lee, J. Nell Brownstein, Carl H. Rush, et al., "Community Health Workers: Part of the Solution," *Health Affairs* 29(7):1338-1342, July 2010.

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