

The Changing Roles of Community Health Workers

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OBJECTIVE

To examine what different types of employers value in hiring Community Health Workers (CHWs), and determine what new competencies CHWs might need to meet workforce demands in the context of an evolving payment landscape and substantial literature suggesting that CHWs are uniquely qualified to address health disparities.

DESIGN

We used a multi-method approach, including: a literature review; development of a database of 76 programs; interviews with 24 key informants; and a qualitative comparison of major CHW competency lists.

RESULTS

We find a shift in CHW employment settings from community-based organizations to hospitals/health systems. Providers that hire CHWs directly, as opposed to partnering with community organizations, report that they value education and training more highly than traditional characteristics, such as peer status. We find substantial similarities across competency lists, but a gap in competencies that relate to CHWs' ability to integrate into health systems while maintaining their unique identity.

CONCLUSIONS

As CHW integration into health care organizations advances, and as states move forward with CHW certification efforts, it is important to develop new competencies that relate to CHW-health system integration. Chief among them is the ability to explain and defend the CHW's unique occupational identity.

Key Words: Determinants of Health /Population Health/Socioeconomic Causes of Health; Health Care Organizations and Systems; Health Workforce: Distribution/Incomes/Training; Integrated Delivery Systems