

# Community Health Workers: An Underused Resource, Rediscovered

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Community health workers (CHWs) have been a part of the U.S. health care workforce since the mid-1960s,<sup>1</sup> but new evidence and new payment models are reinvigorating interest in CHWs.

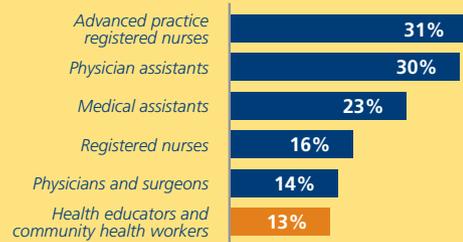
- Randomized controlled trials are pointing to the value of CHWs.<sup>1</sup>
- Federal and state innovations in payment and care delivery include new roles for CHWs.<sup>2</sup>
- As of January 2014, federal regulations allow Medicaid reimbursement for preventive services provided by nonlicensed practitioners, including CHWs.<sup>3</sup>

## What is a CHW?

The CHW workforce consists of both paid professionals and volunteers who:

- Provide a range of health and social services, such as:
  - Patient advocacy
  - Community outreach
  - Patient education
  - Interpretation services
  - Social support
  - Connecting patients and resources
- Have the trust of the community
- Are a key resource in increasing access to health care and reducing health disparities.<sup>1</sup>
- Are required to have state- or local-level certification in some areas.<sup>4</sup>

## CHWs are projected to grow over the next decade



### Projected percent change in employment from 2014 to 2024<sup>4</sup>

Because of the variety of job titles and the large number of unpaid CHWs, estimating the size and composition of the CHW workforce is difficult.<sup>4</sup> Federal estimates indicate that there were about 115,700 employed health educators and CHWs in 2014.<sup>5</sup>

## There are many titles for the same role

### Community Health Worker



## Limited data point to a diverse CHW workforce compared with other health fields

- More than one-third are Hispanic.<sup>4</sup>
- One-fourth are younger than 30 years of age.<sup>4</sup>
- One-fifth are older than 50.<sup>4</sup>
- More than 80% are female.<sup>4</sup>
- More than half have at least some college education, and about 30% have a bachelor's degree.<sup>4</sup>



## Challenges remain for CHWs to reach their full potential

- Gaining acceptance by the broader health care community,
- Obtaining fair wages and consistent reimbursement for services, and
- Being fully integrated into the health care team.<sup>1</sup>

New payment models and recent regulatory changes have generated renewed interest in the growing and notably diverse CHW workforce. Although the future direction of the profession is uncertain, CHWs have the potential to make a huge impact on health care, especially among the underserved. Ultimately, patients, providers, and communities should be connected and enabled to effectively address patient care needs together.

### References:

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  5. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2016–2017 Edition. <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/health-educators.htm>. Accessed October 18, 2016.
- See supplemental digital content at <http://links.lww.com/ACADMED/A418> for additional resources and information about community health workers.

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