Hiring Practices that Support State Integration of Community Health Workers

Introduction

Community Health Workers (CHWs) are defined by the APHA as frontline public health workers who are trusted members of and/or have an unusually close understanding of the community served. This trusting relationship enables CHWs to serve as a liaison or community link between health care and social services and the community to increase access to services, improve the quality and cultural competency of the delivered services, and increase health outcomes within the community served. In addition to this formal definition, CHWs are also classified as health professionals under the Affordable Care Act and have a separate Standard Occupational Classification from the U.S. Department of Labor. CHWs can operate under a variety of work titles, including but not limited to *community health representatives, outreach specialists, community health educators, promotores/as, case managers, peers, navigators, and/or health advocate/advisors.*

CHWs are proven to be effective. In 2020, NACHW and ASTHO published a brief titled "Community Health Workers: Evidence of Their Effectiveness," which documented more than 60 years of evidence across a range of chronic diseases and public health or clinical program interventions. Origins of the CHW movement are closely tied to social justice and advocacy movements for communities that have been marginalized and historically oppressed across many different cultures and ethnicities. This rootedness to the community and commitment towards advocacy and equity is precisely why the CHW profession can play an integral role within state and territorial health agencies (S/THAs) and the community-based organizations with which S/THAs contract. Among the values prioritized by the National Association of Community Health Workers (NACHW), two of the highest are **self-empowerment**, defined as "self-actualization and self-advocacy among CHWs," and **self-determination**, defined as "promoting the efforts of CHWs and the communities in which they work to create a shared vision and direction for the future". As S/THAs look for ways to integrate CHWs into their programs and services, states must work in partnership with CHWs and their organizations to determine the best course of action. This includes working with CHWs to consider a comprehensive range of CHW roles and competencies. In their overview of national CHW studies, Rosenthal et al. have surmised that, "it is essential that policies support the full range of CHW roles, including CHWs role as change agents, so that CHWs achieve their full potential to improve health outcomes, reduce health disparities, and work for social justice."

Assessing Current and Desired CHW Engagement

During the COVID-19 pandemic, NACHW partnered with the Community-Based Workforce Alliance (CBWA) to create a playbook focused on Advancing CHW Engagement in COVID-19 Response Strategies. While this playbook was specifically designed for local health departments (LHD) that wanted to increase engagement of CHWs within their COVID-19 Response Strategies (CRS), this resource provides a valuable basis of knowledge for S/THAs wishing to integrate CHWs into their workforce throughout the COVID-19 response and beyond.

Prior to creating a job description or hiring a CHW, S/THAs should be intentional in assessing their current level of engagement with CHWs and the CHW workforce. Within the playbook, NACHW and CBWA have identified 10 essential areas of engagement. These include:

- Role Definition
- Recruitment
- Training and Professional Development
- Safety and Supplies
- Supervision
- Compensation
- Health Care Integration
- Community Partnerships
- Career Investment
- Program Evaluation

When looking at these ten essential areas, states can use the framework to assess where they exist across an engagement continuum that includes limited or harmful engagement, moderate engagement, and robust engagement. To recruit CHWs into their workforce and create an environment that fosters trust between this community-based workforce and the agency, S/THAs must take steps towards achieving moderate and ideally, robust engagement categories.

Engagement Strategies and Practices to Recruit CHWs

While the NACHW and CBWA Playbook covers 10 essential areas of engagement that are critical for S/THAs to consider when thinking how they can best integrate CHWs into their organization, for the purposes of hiring CHWs, this section will more deeply focus on five of these strategies. These areas include role definition, recruitment, training and professional development, compensation, and career investment.

	Strategies and Practices to Promote Integration and Beneficial Hiring Practices	Resources
Role Definition	• Set clear expectations to non-CHW S/THA employees. CHWs are expected to fulfill and execute all roles and competencies identified by the C3 Project. • Require CHW hiring decisions be made after approval of peer CHWs or CBOs that work in the community to ensure the diversity reflected in the community matches the CHW candidate.	• ASTHO on CHW Training and Core Competencies Across Different States • CHW Core Consensus Project • Rural Health Information Hub: Roles of Community Health Workers
Recruitment	• Clearly establish the qualities, skills, and experience desired in the potential CHW in partnership with the community. • Contract with CHW associations and community leaders to help facilitate connections to best identify individuals from the community to apply for applicable CHW positions. • Consider focusing recruitment efforts at community events and conducting group hiring events. • Take ample time to identify and recruit CHWs; this can take 3-6 months but allows for a compatible match to be made and assists in reducing turnover. • Involve the community throughout the candidate selection process in formal or informal methods. This can include letters of recommendation, personal recommendations, or community debriefs.	• CDC Handbook for Enhancing CHW Programs: Recruitment • Recruiting and Selecting CHWs: Strategies for Success • Considerations for Recruiting, Hiring Community Health Workers • Tips for Recruiting & Hiring Promotores(as) and CHWs as Employees • Rural Health CHWs: Recruiting, Hiring, and Employment Considerations
Training and Professional Development	• Provide supplemental trainings for CHWs develop new skills and strengthen existing skills/competencies. • Work with CHW leaders, CHW associations/networks, and local colleges and universities in your community to identify existing training courses/curriculum and make sure curriculum meets certification requirements (if applicable).	• NACHW CHW Networks and Training Programs • Rural Health Information Hub Training Materials for Community Health Worker Programs • CDC A Community Health Worker Training Resource
Compensation	• Use a variety of funding sources (CDC, Medicaid, and/or HRSA funding opportunities) to compensate CHWs as full-time salaried workers to perform their full scope of work.	• Building Capacity for Community Health Worker Integration: Three Key Steps State Policymakers Should Take During the COVID-19 Crisis and Beyond • Sustainable Financing of CHW Employment • Financing Strategies to Support the Community Health Worker (CHW) Workforce
Career Investment	• If contracting for CHWs, ensure employment is sustained and long-term, not only associated with specific tasks. • Assist in developing a pipeline for CHWs to have careers in S/THAs or their contracting partners.	• Career Paths: Why Develop Careers for Community Health Worker Employees • CHW Training: Building a Career Path • Developing Sustainable Community Health Worker Career Paths

How An Employer Can Develop Hiring Practices to Recruit CHWs

Throughout the hiring process, S/THAs can take deliberate steps to ensure that they are involving CHWs throughout the entire process and promoting an attractive environment to hire CHWs. The CDC draws upon three main phases within the recruitment process that can inform a S/THA how to create appealing job descriptions for CHWs, promote a fair and equitable interview process, and engage with the community to confirm relationships between the CHW candidate and the community. These phases include establishing criteria, identifying candidates, and contacting and interviewing candidates.

Establishing Criteria

The first step in creating a job description and hiring a CHW is to establish criteria to determine what skills, competencies, experience, and roles are necessary for the candidate to have to be successful in their role as a S/THA employed CHW. Within NACHWs Areas of Engagement, this aligns with the Role Definition in the above section. While S/THAs can include the core competencies outlined in the C3 Project (a collaborative project aimed at providing standardized roles and competencies for the CHW profession) and promote CHWs under their employment to fully fulfill those competencies, S/THAs can assess where they can provide more specificity within the job description to meet the needs of the community. When establishing criteria for the job description and necessary experience, S/THAs can recruit CHWs and/or CHW Associations to create an advisory board that is representative of the communities the hired CHW would serve. The purpose of the advisory board is to identify and recommend additional criteria for the hired CHW that is specific to the needs of the community and goes beyond the baseline identified through the C3 project. They may also help determine the importance of each criterion specific to the priorities of the S/THA and the community. S/THAs can find information on CHW Networks and Training Programs on NACHWs website to identify CHW associations and coalitions already established in their states/communities. In addition to establishing the qualities, competencies, and experience needed to serve in the position, the advisory board can also help determine the importance of each criterion specific to the priorities of the S/THA and the community.

Identifying Candidates

When identifying potential candidates, it is important for S/THAs to closely involve CHWs, CHW associations, and CBOs to ensure they are reaching qualified candidates for their specific communities. In addition to including these partners for outreach efforts, it is also important to communicate with them to identify and confirm the innate qualities and gained skills candidates need to be successful in their work. The table below includes examples from the Recruitment document on CDC.gov of potential qualities and skills S/THAs can look for in CHW candidates. It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive list and should not be used in place of partnership with CHWs, CHW associations, and CBOs throughout this process. When assessing whether candidates have the necessary qualities and skills, S/THAs can look to their partners for confirmation and confidence and look beyond paid experience highlighted on resumes or formal applications. In many cases, CHW may not recognize all their own skills or qualities due to lack of recognition or formal education to develop these qualities and skills. S/THAs should consider these qualities and skills regardless of their formal or informal experience.
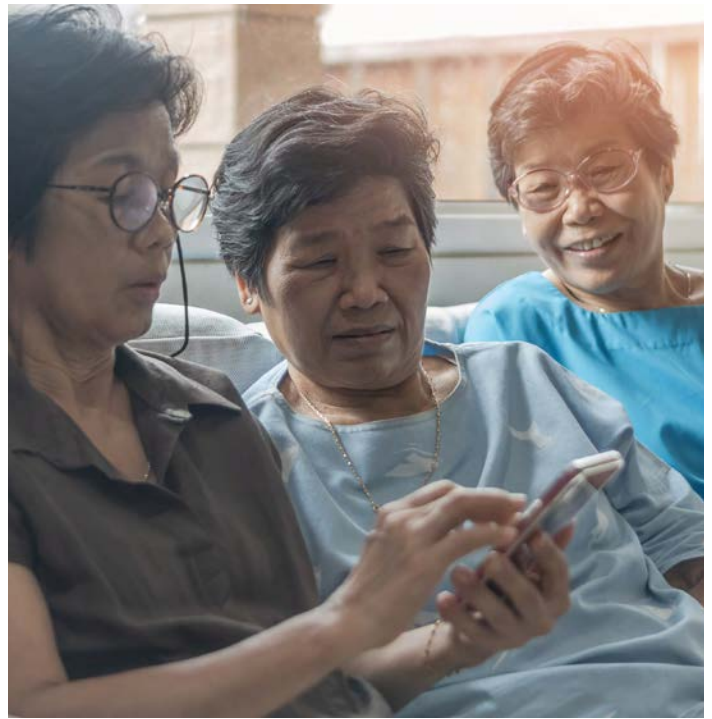
Potential Desired Qualities

- Commitment to community
- Empathy for others
- Warmth
- Respected by others in the community
- Shared values and experiences of the community they serve
- Membership in the community
- Good health, attitudes, and self-esteem
- Rootedness in advocacy
- Ability to consistently grow and learn
- Leadership in the community they serve

Potential Desired Skills

- Exemplary communication skills (speaking, listening, writing, teaching, bilingual abilities).
- Ability to be constructive in interpersonal relationships
- Friendliness, cultural competence, open-minded, and non-judgemental.
- Understanding the healthcare system and priority health issues
- Ability to connect and share knowledge with community memebers (family and friends of clients).
- The ability to indentify and utilize important resources independently.
- Facilitating empowerment and leadership in themsleves and in the community.
- Commitement to resolving conflicts.
- Being honest and respectful.

Contacting and Interviewing Candidates

As previously noted, hiring an CHW is a time-consuming task and should not be rushed. The hiring process which includes interviewing candidates can take up to three to six months and should be done with intentional partnership with CHWs, CHW associations, and CBOs. Additionally, it should be noted that hiring should only occur if there is a quality candidate. According to Tips for Recruiting & Hiring Promotores(as) and Community Health Workers as Employees on the MHP Salud website, it does not serve the applicant, the community, or the S/THA well to try to force a fit and hire an unqualified candidate. S/THAs can work to assess qualifications through the interview process. The following questions and practices can be used to assess the quality of the applicant and ensure alignment between the S/THA's goals and needs, the goals and needs of the community, and the ability of the CHW applicant to fulfill those needs through their qualities and skills. As a reminder, this is not an exhaustive list. S/THAs can work with their CHW and CBO partners to create a specialized interview and application process and develop questions that best fit the needs of their organization and community.

Interview and Application Processes to Promote the Recruitment of CHWs

- Instead of asking for resumes, which may discourage some CHWs from applying for the postion, ask applicants to submit letters to express their interest, their connection to the community, and their qualities and skills.
- To assess and distinguish between a candidate's competencies and qualities, structure the interview with situation-based questioning.
- Request a letter of reference from prior clients or organizations where the CHW worked to verify community connectiveness and competencies.
- When creating the interview panel, include a CHW to lead the interview.

Interview Questions to Promote the Recruitment of CHWs

- In addition to asking standard hiring questions, integrate role playing exercises and activities to assess problem solving skills.
- Ask the candidate open ended questions regarding the community that they would be serving. Examples include: What resources are currently available? What organizations are on the ground doing the work? What areas of danger exist in the community? Where are the important locations in the community (schools, churches, community centers, etc.)? What gaps exist for the community?
- Ask the candidate open-ended questions to describe issues they see in their community as well as the assets that could assist them in eliminating the identified issue.
- Ask questions to assess the candidate's comfortability level in performing specific competencies and skills.

Barriers and Enablers to Consider When Hiring CHWs

When hiring CHWs, it is important to consider the potential barriers applicants may face when they are entering the formal workforce, applying for the position, and interviewing for the position. S/THAs can mitigate these barriers through promoting and establishing enablers. Below are sample barriers and enablers that may apply to potential applicants. S/THAs can partner with CHWs, CHW associations, and CBOs to determine the specific barriers that exist within their community and applicant pool and partner with these entities to create enabling strategies to mitigate barriers.

Barriers for Hiring CHWs	Enablers for Hiring CHWs
• Education requirements (high school or secondary education degrees). • Policies that exclude those who have criminal records from being considered for employment. • Requirements that the applicant must have a driver's license and their own car for transportation. • English fluency requirements. • Immigration status requirements. • In states with certification requirements, barriers include: expensive certification fees, certification courses/exams only taught in English, and lack of certification reciprocity across states. • Lack of professional identity.	• Use a whole person approach to evaluating candidates. • Eliminate or loosen education requirements such as requirements for higher education degrees. • Enact policies that can eliminate or reduce transportation such as carpooling policies, public transportation vouchers, etc. • Eliminate language requirements and assessments when possible. • Employers should clearly communicate roles and responsibilities, requirements, professional development opportunities, required travel, and benefits. • Set up job descriptions that reflect the full range of roles and activities CHWs can perform, rather than using those that are narrowly focused.

Examples of Language from CHW Job Descriptions that Reflect the Full Range of CHW Core Competencies

The core competencies below draw from the gold standard, the Community Health Worker Core Consensus Project (C3 Project), though states may have developed their own sets of core competencies for CHWs. While these competencies and corresponding reflections within a description may provide a basis for how to build a robust job description, job descriptions should be developed to reflect the environment, team, resources, responsibilities, and roles of the CHW. Organizations, including S/THAs can develop and expand upon their own job descriptions, co-develop a CHW job description with a current CHW in their organization and/or network of stakeholders, or ask a community partner about the roles/skills/relationships that a CHW may need to strengthen the needs of the community.

Competency	How the competency might be reflecting in a job description (Duties and responsibilities/qualifications)
Cultural Mediation Among Individuals Communities, and Health/Social Services Systems	• Work collaboratively with other clinical personnel assigned to the same patient.
Providing Culturally Appropriate Health Education and Information	• Knowledgeable about community resources appropriate to needs of patients/families.
Care Coordination, Case Management, and System Navigation	• Follow up with patients via phone calls, home visits, and visits to other settings where patients can be found. • Help patients set personal health-related goals and attend appointments • Work closely with medical providers to help ensure that patients have comprehensive and coordinated care plans. • Responsible for providing consistent communication to the Case Manager to evaluate patient/family status, ensuring that provided information, and reports clearly describe progress.
Providing Coaching and Social Support	• Responsible for establishing trusting relationships with patients and their families while providing general support and encouragement. • Coaches patients in effective management of their chronic health conditions and self-care. Motivates patients/clients to be active and engaged participants in their health and overall well-being.
Advocating for Individuals and Communities	• Acts as a patient advocate and liaison between the patient/family and community service agencies. • Provides support and advocacy during initial medical visit or when necessary to assure clients' medical needs and referrals required are being conveyed.
Building Individual and Community Capacity	• Writes grants and other proposals to secure extramural funding.
Providing Direct Service	• Provides referrals for services to community agencies as appropriate.
Implementing Individual and Community Assessments	• Provides ongoing follow-up, basic motivational interviewing and goal setting with patients/families. • Helps patients identify socio-economic issues that affect their overall health and develop health/social management plans and goals.
Conducting Outreach	• Travels extensively to client homes, community locations, various agencies, and other outreach destinations.
Participating in Evaluation and Research	• Coordinates and monitors services, including comprehensive tracking of clients' compliance in relation to care plan objectives.

Additional Resources on CHW Hiring:

CDC. A Handbook for Enhancing CHW Programs: Recruitment. https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp/pdf/trainpdfs/hb-recruitment.pdf

Heath S. Considerations for Recruiting, Hiring Community Health Workers. Patient Engagement HIT. Jan. 31, 2022. https://patientengagementhit.com/features/considerations-for-recruiting-hiring-community-health-workers

MHP Salud. Tips for Recruiting and Hiring Promatores(as) and Community Health Workers as Employees. https://mhpsalud.org/tips-for-recruiting-and-hiring-community-health-workers-as-employees/

Peynetti P. Recruiting and Selecting CHWs: Strategies for Success. CHW Central. Jan. 20, 2016. https://chwcentral.org/recruiting-and-selecting-chws-strategies-for-success/

Rural Health Information Hub. Recruiting, Hiring, and Employment Considerations. https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/community-health-workers/4/recruiting-hiring-employment-considerations

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