

Introducing Community Health Workers

J.J. is 30 years old and lives in Portland. Because of complications from diabetes and high blood pressure, she suffers from the loss of most of her sight, kidney failure requiring dialysis three times a week, nerve damage to her legs, anxiety and depression. Last year she visited the Emergency Department 95 times and was hospitalized 16 times, costing the Oregon Health Plan \$250,000.

This year a Community Health Worker (CHW) keeps in close contact with J.J. to set up and keep regular appointments with her doctor, behavioral therapist, and dialysis. The CHW helps with her diet, and organizes her pills and provides practical help like giving her bus tickets, taking food to her, and keeping in touch through phone calls, emails, and texts. The CHW also linked J.J. to community resources and found subsidized housing for her. J.J.'s health is now more stable and visits to the hospital have dropped dramatically.

Pilot programs across the US and abroad have shown that CHWs are cost effective and result in better health, improved use of health services, reduced costs due to preventive care and less reliance on emergency and hospital care.

This year the Oregon Legislature passed a health transformation bill creating Coordinated Care Organizations (CCO) which will provide physical, mental, and dental health services for Medicaid patients within a global budget. CCOs will be held accountable for health outcomes with a strong incentive for prevention and wellness and will be encouraged to be innovative to meet the needs of the communities they serve. One tool in the health reform toolkit is the appropriate use of CHWs.

So what does this mean for Homecare Workers?

There are still many unknowns about how CCOs will work. But this is what we know so far:

- CHWs will be needed everywhere in Oregon.
- The Oregon Homecare Commission will develop a CHW training program for homecare workers who qualify.
- The Non-Traditional Health Worker subcommittee is informing the Oregon Health Policy Board on issues around roles, training requirements, certification, and career pathways.
- Your union is directly involved in working with the Homecare Commission and serving on the Non-Traditional Health Worker subcommittee.

Here are the roles of a Community Health Worker that have been defined so far. Do you see yourself doing some of these roles?

- **Outreach and Mobilization**
Provide health-related information to community members and those who are underserved due to barriers like lack of insurance, limited English, or isolation.
- **Community and Cultural Liaison**
Create and support connections between individuals, family, community, health systems, community based organizations bridging culture, language, geographic differences, social determinants of health.
- **Case Management, Coordination, and System Navigation**
Work together with your client's health care team, advocate and help people decide on options and accessing services.
- **Health Promotion and Coaching**
Help people increase control over their health and improve wellness.

The CHW's job requires many skills, including good communication, interpersonal skills, teaching, service coordination, advocacy, capacity-building, knowledge base on public health, the community, and resources, and organizational ability. The good thing is that skills can be taught through study and practice.

However, if you are thinking that becoming a CHW is a good career move for you, keep in mind that Qualities of a CHW cannot be taught and are absolutely necessary to do this work. These qualities are:

- Belonging to the community you'll be serving
- Friendly, outgoing, sociable
- Strong and courageous
- Patient
- Open-minded and non-judgmental
- Motivated and capable of self-directed work
- Caring, compassionate
- Honest
- Committed and dedicated
- Respectful
- Open and eager to grow, change and learn
- Dependable, responsible, reliable
- Flexible and adaptable
- Desire to help the community
- Persistent
- Creative and resourceful
- Sense of humor
- Supportive (helping) rather than directive (telling)
- Emotionally mature
- A model for trying to live a healthy lifestyle

If you are interested in learning more about Community Health Workers, contact Marilyn McManus at 503-408-4090, ext 466. The next issue of Dignity will have an update on CCOs, Community Health Workers, and training opportunities as they develop.