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The Role of Community Health Workers in Bridging Gaps in Access to Care

Kabiga Chelule Kwemoi

Faculty of Engineering Kampala International University Uganda

ABSTRACT

Community Health Workers (CHWs) plays an important in improving healthcare access and equity, particularly for underserved and marginalized communities. This paper examines the functions, history, and evolution of CHWs, emphasizing their importance as cultural liaisons and advocates within healthcare systems. CHWs are instrumental in delivering preventive and supportive health services, reducing healthcare costs, and addressing socioeconomic and cultural barriers to care. Despite these benefits, challenges persist in fully integrating CHWs within formal healthcare structures, due to limitations in funding, training, and policy support. This paper examines successful CHW models, highlights best practices, and provides case studies that illustrate CHWs' impact on public health outcomes. It concludes with recommendations for expanding CHW initiatives to address disparities and strengthen community-centered healthcare delivery.

Keywords: Community Health Workers (CHWs), Healthcare access, Health disparities, Cultural competence, Preventive care.

INTRODUCTION

Community health workers (CHWs) play a vital role in the healthcare system by delivering a full range of services designed to promote, maintain, and restore health. CHWs offer support for health promotion and prevention, provide direct care and support to special needs populations, and facilitate cultural mediation between consumers and healthcare providers. As "natural helpers," their values are congruent with those of public health in empowering vulnerable and underserved populations. CHWs provide a critical link between the healthcare and social service systems and utilize formal and informal helping and advocacy skills. The primary goal of public health services is to improve individual and community health by serving those who "may not be seeking professional care but may still need help" [1, 2]. CHWs are also crucial in promoting health equity, which is associated with reductions in disparities. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released its first National Prevention and Health Promotion Strategy to accomplish four strategic directions, one of which is to create social and physical environments that promote health. CHWs contribute to promoting health across many settings including clinics and hospital emergency rooms, neighborhoods, schools, and businesses. By providing preventive and supportive health services to individuals, families, and groups, CHWs not only help clients prevent debilitating diseases and health problems, but they also curb the costs associated with these health problems. This report illustrates why and how to integrate CHWs into healthcare delivery systems [3, 4].

Definition and Scope of Community Health Workers

CHWs are health professionals working outside of health facilities and who are linked with the community using a range of attributes and skills that mainly target to benefit the health and well-being of the population. Therefore, the main focus of the work of community health workers in any country is to support and work towards the development of healthy communities. This job demands specific application of knowledge and skills in matters of health to support the development process of communities, in addition to being part of the health care structure. While community health workers may function to help and support curative care and health services, their central role is not the management of diseases [1, 5].

CHWs differ from other health workers by the qualities of their direction and their training to link grassroots communities to health and development. They usually live in the same community as the residents. Unlike revolving door health workers, they can guide other residents to the nearest health facilities. These qualities make them effective in their crucial roles, which broadly incorporate the four main categories: outreach, counseling, education, and advocacy. They are usually part of the community; therefore, they can be great companions and facilitators to enable links between various agencies working in the community [6, 7]. Community health workers have a very important role to play in well-developed health systems to bring about the overall improvement of health among the general population of any region. To a very large extent, they try to make the people responsible for their health rather than take on the financial burden of caring for the increasing number of sick people. Thus, health system input can be safely directed towards preventive care. The main focus of community health workers in most countries, even those with well-developed health systems, is indeed the development of healthier communities by focusing on the preventive role of health [8, 9].

Historical Background and Evolution

In contemporary health systems, community health workers (CHWs) provide a critical link to the thousands of communities that lack access to the care they need. Economic, political, and societal resource changes influence the identities, roles, relationships, locations, and tasks of CHWs; understanding historical antecedents of CHW programs may help policymakers look for ways to compensate for unforeseen consequences of policy and social development. In the years after the Civil War in the United States, some of the older settlement houses began a disciplined inquiry into the social causes of disease. Outstanding examples were the Hull House of Chicago and the Henry Street Settlement of New York. A wide scan of public health literature of the early twentieth century only turned up one likely journal. The Foreign Quarterly Review contains two articles on the condition of the French peasantry. In the 1960s, a global campaign brought the issue of primary health care to the forefront of development policy discourse [10, 11]. Partly as a result, dozens of countries began relying on "lay health workers" to fill gaps in coverage and overcome social and behavioral barriers between health services and populations. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, many of these countries institutionalized, or attempted to institutionalize, the work of these "LHWs." One of the largest evaluations of such programs carried out in multiple countries evaluated 34 randomized trials examining the use of "TBA" initiatives; it was discussed again in the 1980s and was at that time summarized in 47 pages of small print. The rise and proliferation of CHWs cannot be separated from major health and development initiatives. This historical transformation from ignored, invisible, and voluntary assistant to human resource of crucial importance occurred over and via a series of critical junctions produced by external agents. All of the foregoing insight highlights the importance of critically engaging in investigation into national, community, and local-level policy and social structures to draw out the interconnected relationships between CHWs and regulatory actors, structures, and systems [12, 13].

Importance of Community Health Workers in Healthcare Delivery

Community Health Workers (CHWs) can bridge the gaps in the quality delivery of healthcare services, particularly for marginalized populations. Primarily from the communities within which they work, CHWs serve as liaisons or intermediaries between the communities and the healthcare delivery system. Findings illustrate that CHWs can improve accessibility to healthcare services for underserved segments of the population by implementing strategies that lead to increased utilization of health services. Besides direct healthcare provision, the role of CHWs has expanded to include aspects of well-being such as health promotion and disease prevention within communities. Along with visits to primary care physicians, community health workers can facilitate access to disease self-management education and preventive health information. Incorporating the patient, a community health worker, and culturally sensitive materials into the delivery system illustrates an approach that is culturally sensitive and respects individual, community, and cultural differences. Moreover, CHWs have the advantage of their cultural competence, which allows for improved partnerships among healthcare providers. They enrich clinical care settings by building trust and providing health communications and liaisons with diverse populations from a community context. Consequently, healthcare managers can program delivery system interventions by using CHWs to act as go-betweens for diverse groups of people for promotion and their healthcare services. Access to CHWs may therefore lead to improved health outcomes in certain diseases and reduced health disparities. Clinical care can be improved by using the patient's motivation and the CHW. Services can be offered that were not previously accessible, and collectively, fewer clients visit the emergency department or experience deteriorating health outcomes. Access to at least one of these providers can help decrease racial and socioeconomic disparities in population health because both

primary care physicians and community health workers can effectively deliver health information. Constraints affecting access have also led to the slow acceptance of the CHW's role in the healthcare system. Health outcomes involving the dissemination of health and social service information to linguistically isolated or low literacy communities were most strongly related to CHW or lay health worker assistance [14, 15].

Improving Access to Care in Underserved Communities

The U.S. healthcare system consistently struggles with disparities in care access and health outcomes for its most vulnerable populations. A number of barriers prevent many Americans from obtaining and maintaining appropriate, affordable, and comprehensive health services, leaving some ethnic and socioeconomic groups disproportionately affected. These limitations may be financial; it can be prohibitively costly for under- and uninsured individuals to secure inpatient, outpatient, ancillary, prescription, and other medically related services. However, other barriers to care access are largely non-monetary in nature. Many impoverished and rural Americans with major or complex medical concerns may be unable to secure needed services due to inadequate health services reach. These reports illustrate that large numbers of systemic, long-term problems with care access and delivery for particular patient populations have contributed to lower health outcomes and delayed medical treatment for many [16, 17]. A chief prevention strategy for community health workers is the broad, all-inclusive approach to service outreach. The community health workers highlighted by this report utilized diverse public engagement mechanisms such as door-to-door outreach, health fair booths, and formal community meeting settings. In doing so, racial and ethnic minorities are made aware of the location and availability of health and health-related services. In seeking to connect entire communities and neighborhoods with needed preventive and curative services, community health workers may instigate a wave of individual service use in these locales. This method of public education regarding available health and human services can also empower individual potential patients to seek their own healthcare and social services, often before noticeable adverse health outcomes. The survey furthermore found that when sufficiently motivated to seek health and other help, a majority of these Americans do successfully access these necessary services. This illustrates the potential for widespread community health worker efforts benefiting at-risk individual patient and community-level health directly. These extensive successes serve as just one example of community health workers significantly reducing healthcare service disparities and improving access [18, 19].

Cultural Competence and Trust Building

It is widely recognized that interventions to improve health will be more effective if conducted within a cultural context. As such, attempts to address barriers to care must be rooted within a community context. Community health workers help make culturally complex and logistically challenging communities more accessible to health departments and providers. Community health workers also develop relationships with partners, community residents, and organizations, so they can connect people with resources. A history of positive relationships means residents are more likely to trust someone, such as a community health worker, who is stalled in making a healthcare appointment. Longstanding association with the community prompts residents to see community health workers as neighbors with a specific skill more than public health paraprofessionals or professionals [20, 21]. With interactions based on relationships of trust, community health workers can more easily discuss health and health issues directly rather than dealing with issues by proxy. Trust can also encourage adherence to health messages. For example, in the field of tuberculosis control, it is documented that a better relationship with nurses or healthcare providers leads to better outcomes in terms of patient adherence to treatment and contact investigations. In an ethnographic investigation of local beliefs about tuberculosis transmission and treatment, it was found that patients were clearer about these facts than newly diagnosed tuberculous patients in a neighboring country, in part because they knew and trusted community health workers. Of course, relationships must rebalance power; providers' sense of having more power than patients restrict the kind of doctor-patient relationship that enables adherence. So, trust cannot replace costly outreach and at least some elements of a stronger social safety net, but it is an important element. While most people hope for a reduced need for care, all people hope for access to care. For many, a relationship with someone who can help understand the system and reduce fears inherent in interactions with it gives much greater access. In turn, greater access to care will reduce the current status of two separate and unequal healthcare systems that perpetuate health disparities [22, 23].

Training and Qualifications of Community Health Workers

Traditionally, CHWs have been laypeople from the same community they serve, and therefore come from diverse backgrounds based on the community in which they reside. Ideally, their skills encompass other

skills that allow their role to be successful; however, not all CHWs initially have such skills. Community health workers should have a working knowledge of public health principles, good communication skills, people and coalition-building skills, facilitating skills, and basic casework skills. CHWs should also be trained in confidentiality and ethical issues, working with diverse populations, including those who may not trust newcomers. Communities have historically turned to women to act as CHWs. A community health worker should represent the socio-economic, gender, and ethnic background of those they are serving [24, 25]. There is no widely accepted national certification process available. Part of the problem is that the roles and responsibilities vary from state to state and even from city to city. Many businesses cobble together what they should be doing to train CHWs. Defendants in a recent case also noted that there are currently few training programs that target community health workers and community health worker supervisors. To maximize their impact, there should be specific training programs for CHWs, CHW supervisors, state and local health department representatives, and others involved in planning and training them, such as trainers and community advocates. It should be recognized that there is particular content for these programs so that everyone involved is on the same page. This is also critical for ongoing professional development. There is a three-day training on this topic that has been piloted and held in several locations; delegates have attended from across the country. We always receive excellent evaluations. There is also a training program available through AHEC in North Carolina and some other state-level training programs as well. All have been rated highly by users [2, 20].

Challenges and Opportunities in Utilizing Community Health Workers

In many low-income and minority communities, health outreach and patient education are led by community health workers (CHWs). Commonly characterized as individuals working in their own neighborhoods to bridge translation, cultural, and other social divides between medically trained professionals and the communities they serve, CHWs share several characteristics. A federal study of CHWs described the core characteristics of the typical worker as an individual who has command of more than one language in English, knows the community in which they work and its people, can provide psychosocial support, can collaborate with other helpers in health delivery and health-related services, and who believes in primary prevention. Despite this long history of work—whether under the title of promotors, lay health advisors, health outreach workers, or others—the health and healthcare systems haven't utilized CHWs and their findings to work at full capacity [26, 27]. Building and structuring a CHW program presents four interrelated challenges, opportunities, and innovations stakeholders must consider. Financial support: The generation of sufficient funds to underwrite the CHW initiative with salaries and other employee benefits. Providing recognition and compensation: Instead of having the function of CHWs be voluntary, or selecting individuals based primarily on their command of linguistic fluency and then assessing other skills, the work CHWs should be remunerated commensurate with other paraprofessionals. Oversight: The structuring of supervision not only reflects where CHWs are administratively located but also allows for working in multidisciplinary teams. The oversight of activities must be done by a manager or an office whose primary focus is community outreach and education, even if the office is structurally located in a state or county health department, American Indian or Alaskan Native Clinic, Managed Care Organization, or other entity. Legal and public policy environments may impact the way these groups are structured. Integrating CHW work in a way that presents credibility compared to individuals certified in medical language, interventions, and skills who earn higher salaries is important when funds are limited. Efforts aimed at building public policy and community support must be initiated. Future work presents several areas for further study. The community must show ownership in the development of CHWs and the programs they create. Success stories hail from immigrant groups where organized churches have been governing leadership. By tapping religious, community, and other organizations, attention can be directed to the development of these programs whereby policymakers and funders demonstrate commitment by investing resources. The communities and their leaders cannot be passive recipients of government programs, or else resentment or resistance to public health may arise. Success stories that support the utilization continue [28, 29].

Case Studies and Best Practices

CHW programs featured in this paper represent a wide array of models and approaches because the projects were designed in complete partnership with the participating community members, who developed approaches best suited to their unique communities' needs and cultures. Despite this diversity, many common elements and best practices can be recognized among them [30]. CHWs are uniquely poised to expand access to healthcare services because of their deep roots and long-standing relationships within the same communities where specified healthcare gaps have been identified. These case studies provide valuable accounts of not only the different roles that CHWs might fulfill to address local health

issues but also best practices for implementing community-based models. As an ethical operating principle, CHW projects were developed in complete partnership with the targeted communities, ensuring support from residents and access to their expertise and leadership. Projects built on the existing informal networks in which health advice is often shared in disadvantaged communities dispel the history of exploitation of certain populations in medical research by offering genuinely empowered community participation in all aspects of the research. In addition to addressing local health needs, the case studies show that rigorously documented, successfully conducted, and thoroughly evaluated CHW programs contribute to an organized increase in activities within a given public health priority area. Where replicated, these effective programs could add a critical mass to address the specific needs across different counties [4].

CONCLUSION

Community Health Workers are essential in bridging healthcare gaps, especially in underserved areas where barriers to care are significant. By leveraging their community ties, cultural competence, and preventive focus, CHWs enhance accessibility, build trust, and empower individuals to participate in their own health management. CHWs offer a cost-effective and culturally sensitive approach to healthcare, which, if fully supported and integrated into formal health systems, could mitigate disparities and improve health outcomes. A strategic focus on training, policy advocacy, and sustainable funding is necessary to maximize the potential of CHWs. Expanding and standardizing CHW programs presents an invaluable opportunity to build resilient, inclusive, and community-centered healthcare systems.

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