

Using Community Health Workers in the COVID-19 response



CONTRIBUTOR: *Laura Kliethermes, Grants Transformation Director, Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services*

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The Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services worked with statewide partners to implement the Community Health Worker Initiative. The initiative aimed to identify underserved populations and match them with Community Health Workers to assist with education, surveillance, and referrals to programs and resources to mitigate COVID-19 and help control risk factors.

The “What”

The Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) partnered with local public health agencies (LPHAs), the Missouri Primary Care Association (MPCA), the Missouri Pharmacy Association (MPA), a project coordinator, and other community-based organizations (CBOs) to implement the Community Health Worker Initiative (CHWi) through the use of Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Disease (ELC) funding.



The purpose of the CHWi is to identify underserved populations and match them with Community Health Workers (CHWs) to assist with education, surveillance, and referrals to programs and resources to mitigate COVID-19 and help control risk factors, such as chronic diseases, that lead to poor health outcomes as a direct result of COVID-19 infection. This approach was chosen because CHWs are trusted members of the communities they serve and have an evidence-based foundation that impacts the ability to improve chronic disease health outcomes.

All Missourians, specifically those with underlying chronic diseases that make them at higher risk for severe disease, are the target population for this project.

ELC funding was used to hire and deploy CHWs to communities across the state, educating them on COVID-19 and pandemic preparedness. The CHWs then worked with clients, primarily those with chronic diseases, to educate them on COVID-19 risk reduction strategies, risk factors, and prevention.

The CHWs also refer clients at the highest risk for poor health outcomes, resulting from COVID-19-related illnesses and those with chronic health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and chronic kidney disease, to community resources, clinical services, and lifestyle change programs.



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ELC funding is also used to provide CHW training to pharmacy technicians to assist with COVID-19 mitigation efforts and addressing health disparities for patients with underlying health conditions.

Additionally, the Missouri Pharmacy Association developed an electronic platform to house the virtual CHW course for pharmacy technicians, including areas of focus for COVID-19 mitigation strategies and health disparities around COVID-19. In addition to marketing and recruiting pharmacy technicians to become CHWs across the state, MPA also provides scholarships to pharmacy technicians to become CHWs. MPA recruits and educates Missouri pharmacies to integrate additional pharmacy teams into the efforts of pandemic planning.

To implement this multi-faceted project, DHSS contracted with a project coordinator to help identify the LPHAs, Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), and other contractors to work on this project. The project coordinator also coordinates the implementation of all other contracts in this project and monitors all contracts to ensure that all CHWs have completed the required training, as well as monitors invoices and required reports.

The “So What”

This initiative has decreased the risk for severe COVID-19 and long-haul COVID-19 and contributed to the reduction of chronic disease overall. CHWs have an important role in mitigation efforts and emergency preparedness.

A total of 123 CHWs are employed through CHWi:

- 26 at CBOs
- 33 at LPHAs
- 64 at FQHCs

Additionally, 30 CHW Supervisors are employed:

- 6 at LPHAs
- 24 at FQHCs

This project has also trained 252 pharmacy technicians as CHWs. 51,958 clients have been assessed for underlying health conditions and 21,561 referrals to social determinants of health resources have been completed as of November 2023.

70 of Missouri’s 114 counties have been served through CHWi, both rural and urban.

Before CHWi, there were 0 credentialed CHWs in Missouri. As of October 2023, there were 401 credentialed CHWs. Additionally, just 15 pharmacy technicians had been trained as CHWs before the implementation of CHWi. As of November 2023, 252 pharmacy technicians have now been trained as CHWs.

The “Now What”

The longer-term outcomes will continue to impact communities at risk for years to come. CHWs currently working in this space will continue to address chronic disease and social determinants of health that create disparities within communities that have the highest rates of underlying health conditions. This will ensure that resources are provided and referrals to programs are made that assist individuals with lifestyle change and will in turn decrease the likelihood of poor health outcomes and will continue to be the focus regardless of funding stream. CHWs have received and will continue to receive valuable training that will prepare them for the next pandemic. Through this training, they will continue to

address the needs of the communities they serve so that they too will be prepared for years to come.

To prepare for the future, at the inception of the contracting process for this project, all contractors that employ and/or train CHWs have been asked, through contract deliverables, to develop a sustainability plan that will allow continued employment of CHWs through established funding streams that would offset personnel costs. Contractors have also been encouraged to seek additional funding sources or new grant opportunities that would allow for continued work with Missouri’s most vulnerable populations in communities that have the highest chronic disease morbidity rates.