



Massachusetts Association of Community Health Workers Agenda For Increased Health Care Access Through Enhanced Community Health Worker Programs

Issue Brief

Issue

Community Health Workers (CHWs) are essential members of the public health workforce. Most Massachusetts community health worker programs rely on categorical, cyclical grants for funding. Currently the Massachusetts Department of Public Health is the single largest funder of CHW programs in Massachusetts.¹ The CHW funding streams are inadequate in the Commonwealth's efforts to reduce health disparities, increase primary care use and save health care dollars.

Background

Community Health Worker (CHW) is an umbrella term to describe members of the public health workforce who provide a critical link between communities and the health and human service delivery systems. According to the recent Department of Public Health report, "Community Health Workers: Essential To Improving Health In Massachusetts", CHWs in our state have over 50 different job titles. While CHWs have many different job titles, all work to improve access to healthcare and human services, including enrollment into MassHealth and Commonwealth Care.

In 1965, under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Massachusetts established one of the earliest CHW programs in the nation's first community health center, at the Columbia Point Housing Project. While CHWs in the Commonwealth have a long history of increasing access to health care and human services, funding for CHW programs continues to be unstable. Unstable funding for CHWs and our programs often translate to communities losing trusted members of the health care and human service delivery teams and reduce access to care.

*"Community health workers offer promise as a community-based resource to increase racial and ethnic minorities' access to health care and to serve as a liaison between healthcare providers and the communities they serve"*²

Building and sustaining CHW programs statewide impacts the health and the economy of the Commonwealth. CHWs are a significant asset to the people of Massachusetts.

¹ Ballester, Gail. Massachusetts Department of Public Health. *Community Health Workers: Essential To Improving Health In Massachusetts*, 2005.

² Institute of Medicine. *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; 2003

Without their efforts many residents would either go without health care and other vital services, or would access care when it is most costly.³

Implementation of Chapter 58 provides the Commonwealth with opportunity to expand upon current CHW efforts to increase health care access. The Massachusetts Association of Community Health Workers is encouraged that the priorities of the new governor include workforce development and health access, both directly affect community health workers and the communities we serve. We offer the following suggestions to complement health care reform:

1. **Promote a unified definition of community health workers in all state contracts and policy** based on the Massachusetts Association of Community Health Workers accepted Department of Public Health CHW functional definition.
2. **Promote sustainable CHW programs**, including a statewide training infrastructure.
3. **Promote full integration of CHWs into the health care delivery system** by integrating CHW work into reimbursement policies through MassHealth and other state accounts. (e.g. EOHHS, DOE and DHCD).
4. **Implement Section 110 of Chapter 58** to document the efficacy and impact of CHW services in the Commonwealth.
5. **Implement existing MDPH policies** to support CHW workforce development.
6. **Create an Office of Community Health Workers** to develop and monitor outreach programs to increase access to health care to reduce health disparities.

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³ Ballester, Gail. Massachusetts Department of Public Health. *Community Health Workers: Essential To Improving Health In Massachusetts*, 2005.