Integrating Community Health Workers into Primary Care Practice to Better Serve Older Adults

Yendira Rosario  
*Lehigh Valley Health Network*, Yendira.Rosario@lvhn.org

Gloria Rivera  
*Lehigh Valley Health Network*, Gloria.Rivera@lvhn.org

Luz Cruz  
*Lehigh Valley Health Network*, Luz.Cruz@lvhn.org

Brenda Frutos  
*Lehigh Valley Health Network*, Brenda.Frutos@lvhn.org

Cathy A. Coyne PhD, MPH  
*Lehigh Valley Health Network*, Cathy_A.Coyne@lvhn.org

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Yendira Rosario, Gloria Rivera, Luz Cruz, Brenda Frutos, MPH, Cathy Coyne, PhD, MPH
Lehigh Valley Health Network, Allentown, Pa.

INTRODUCTION

Although Community Health Workers (CHWs) have been working in small non-profits for decades performing outreach and other related activities, they are relatively new to health care teams in the US. CHWs have faced challenges when integrating into these teams due to the culture of health care and its institutionalized hierarchy.

In a program designed to improve the health of geriatric patients with complex needs, CHWs were teamed with nurse care managers and pharmacists. These interdisciplinary teams focused on helping patients to attain their health and social goals, maintain independence, navigate the health care system, and obtain community resources. CHWs were able to cross the cultural divide and gain the trust of fellow team members and providers, enabling an interdisciplinary approach to elderly primary care.

After 3 years of implementation, the CHWs performed nearly 1,600 home visits among geriatric patients in primary care:

- 388 geriatric patients have had at least one CHW home visit
  - Mean age – 74.9 years
  - 66% Female
  - 61% Hispanic/Latino
  - 52.9% Spanish-speaking

DISCUSSION

CHALLENGES

- Non-conventional role in health care
- Lack of trust
- Role clarity between CHWs and social workers
- CHW’s credentials
- Office space for CHWs
- Documentation in the electronic medical record system

CONCLUSION

- CHWs are well-suited to work in clinical settings
- CHWs bring unique understanding, perspectives, and value to care teams and organizations
- CHWs have demonstrated their abilities to adapt to health care settings
- CHWs are well-positioned to support those marginalized from the health care system to seek care

Strategies for integrating CHWs into clinical settings include:

- Providing formal training
- Creating a positive and supportive work environment
- Building trust and open-communication with clinicians and staff
- Encouraging CHW participation in practice meetings and daily huddles

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