



Addressing barriers and supporting community health

Community health workers fill critical role in healthcare

When Kaitland Valencia became a certified community health worker for Presbyterian Healthcare Services, she realized she had been training for the position in her personal life. As the computer savvy one in her large family, she slipped into a natural case manager role to meet her family's needs, researching available resources and encouraging them to advocate for themselves.

"A community health worker is a trusted member of the community who is able to act as a liaison between the patient and the healthcare system," said Valencia, who now supervises community health workers in Albuquerque. "They have the knowledge to educate patients about the diseases that affect them and connect them to community agencies that can help them with social determinants of health like utilities, food, personal safety, transportation and housing."

Social determinants of health – economic, social and environmental conditions where people live, work, learn and play – affect people's health status and ability to manage such prevalent chronic diseases as diabetes and heart disease. Community health workers consider the whole picture of a person's life. Do they have transportation to get their medicine at a pharmacy? Can they afford to pay for that medicine? Do they have a stable refrigerator to safely store insulin to manage their diabetes? Do they speak the same language as the doctor? Are they safe from physical violence?

In some cases, addressing these issues is key to whether a patient is healthy or sick. "It's evident there are so many needs of patients that providers can't address in a clinical setting," said Elizabeth Holguin, an Albuquerque nurse practitioner with a Master of Public Health and a PhD in Nursing. "It decreases the feeling of helplessness that providers have when community health workers can address the social determinants of health that have much more impact on their care."

The value of community health workers extends beyond supporting an individual patient. "We model how to access resources on their own so they can be independent and resilient, and maybe they can help their families and communities too," Valencia said.

National studies have found that patients managed their hypertension and diabetes better – including medication compliance, medical-appointment attendance and the reduction of hypertension risks – if community health workers were involved.

"Effectiveness of Community Health Workers in the Care of People with Hypertension," an article in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, cited 14 studies about community health workers' effectiveness. "As community-change agents and trusted peers, CHWs appear to be able to motivate, facilitate and help empower community members to maintain required behaviors that contribute to their own continuity of care and improved health outcomes," the article concluded.

Nationally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is encouraging states to expand community health workers' roles in healthcare, and New Mexico is taking up the charge. Health organizations, including the New Mexico Department of Health, are increasingly turning toward community health

workers as a way to resolve the barriers people face in a state with high rates of poverty and ethnic diversity as well as a dire shortage of health professionals.

In 2008, New Mexico became one of the first states in the country to establish an Office of Community Health Workers within the Department of Health to train and certify community health workers. It's a first step to building a system that recognizes the value of community health workers and includes them in health-insurance plans.

"They are in such a unique position to influence people and understand the challenges they are living under," said Judith Gabriele, who oversees chronic-disease programs like diabetes, heart disease and cancer at the Department of Health. "I see the demand for involving community health workers in chronic-disease management as huge."

The Department is expanding its work with community health workers, supporting health systems that employ such workers as well as offering new specialty trainings in cardiovascular health and diabetes. "We hope this will allow community health workers to become a larger part of the care team and this specialization will better prepare them to educate patients on cardiovascular disease best practices," said Ryan Sanchez, health educator in the Department's Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Program.

*"Community health workers bring up
the health of the entire community."*

— Kim Ray Krupnick, Santa Fe RN

Community health workers can now lead the Department's chronic disease self-management workshops, a free program the Department offers to reduce the burden of diabetes in New Mexico.

"Because they are such trusted community members, I have very high hopes that this is going to be a cadre of professionals who will help us reach more people and more populations at risk," Gabriele said.

La Familia Medical and Dental Center in Santa Fe hires community health workers who understand the culturally appropriate ways to address lifestyle issues that contribute to chronic health conditions and support patients to achieve their optimal health, according to Kim Ray Krupnick, RN, La Familia's director of health education.

La Familia's community health workers are integral to its healthcare system, informing providers of patient barriers, working behind the scenes to address basic needs, and partnering with the registered dietician and diabetes educator to provide healthy, culturally relevant recipes for patients with chronic health conditions.

La Familia invests in these workers because of the critical difference they make in patient outcomes, but the work is time consuming and health insurance companies don't pay for their services. Reimbursement would benefit La Familia as well as the workers, Krupnick said.

"It would be really helpful and empowering to be recognized for the important work they do," she said.