

# VOLUNTEER COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS FACT SHEET



*I know that I'm here for people, to serve them in an appropriate way.*  
-Community Health Worker in Michigan

## INTRODUCTION

As Community Health Worker (CHW) programs become increasingly recognized and present throughout the country, a variety of models and compensation options have emerged.

Advocates for compensating CHWs, either as employees or as consultants/contractors, strongly believe that CHWs should be paid for their time just as staff members are. If an agency or health center benefits in some way from the work of the CHW, compensation is not only just, but indeed, required. Otherwise, the model can move dangerously toward exploitation.

Others feel just as strongly that in order to be truly committed to the community (and not to an organization), a volunteer model is the only genuine and grassroots option. In this model, CHWs perform their work as volunteers, receiving their compensation



primarily in the form of personal satisfaction and the knowledge that they are making their communities better and healthier places to live.

An organization or health center considering implementing a CHW program with volunteers should closely examine their rationale. Volunteer CHW programs implemented primarily for cost-saving reasons will have to carefully monitor that their allegiance is aligned with the health and well-being of the community and not with the priorities of the funder or organization. Programs implemented primarily for philosophical reasons will have the best interest of the community at heart, but will discover that no program is completely cost-free.

Volunteer CHW models have been successful in many places, but, like all models, have their pros and cons, which are described below.

## BENEFITS

- Volunteers do the work because they are committed to helping their community
- Volunteers are not required to provide work authorization
- Volunteers can expand the reach of the program without greatly increasing costs

## CHALLENGES

- Volunteers may leave for paid jobs, causing frequent turnover
- Volunteer retention requires time and dedication
- Volunteers cannot give as much time to the program as paid CHWs

*All photos by Rural Women's Health Project*

## RECRUITMENT

A trusted presence in the community is one of the most important factors in successful recruitment of volunteer Community Health Workers. This trust can be established through a long or respected history in the community, through staff members who are familiar with and actively involved in the community, or through other Community Health Workers who recruit their contacts, family or friends. Factors which can make it challenging to recruit CHWs include topics that are sensitive in nature, such as sexual assault or substance use or abuse, and lack of time to work as a volunteer.

## RETENTION

Issues which affect retention of volunteer CHWs include:

- Lack of program structure or clearly defined expectations on the part of the organization
- Insufficient staff time to support the work of the CHWs (time to train, provide regular support, and assist with program expectations, if needed)
- Competing priorities on the part of the CHW (e.g., family, work, school) which make it challenging to participate in a volunteer program even if their enthusiasm is high
- Lack of financial incentives or too many personal financial costs related to participation in the program

## SUPERVISION & MANAGEMENT

An organization should ensure that it has the infrastructure to support a successful program. This infrastructure includes



sufficient and ongoing training, clear expectations, periodic individual and group support, access to needed supplies, reimbursement for mileage or phone use, and a clear description of outcomes and results as needed.

Expectations for volunteer CHWs range from responding to needs as they arise in the community; organizing and sometimes leading group sessions in their home or immediate community (e.g., health issues, citizenship, craftmaking); assisting with needs assessments; providing information about resources in response to a request; conducting outreach; and supporting the more formal outreach and community education provided by a paid CHW. Paperwork or

evaluation is usually minimal and revolves around collecting basic attendance or demographic information.

## INNOVATIONS IN RECOGNITION OR COMPENSATION

Several creative methods for thanking, recognizing and/or retaining volunteer CHWs have been identified and include:

- Professional development or training opportunities internally and externally
- Gift cards, including gas or grocery cards
- Bonuses on the holidays or during another particular day of the year
- Credit for community service hours for residents living in cooperative housing communities
- Promotion to paid positions within an organization
- “Community Health Worker of the Month” recognition
- Agency-wide banquets or special meals and events
- More personal recognition celebrations with a meal
- Certificates or credit towards credentialing
- Key chains, t-shirts, flowers, door prizes, and other tokens of appreciation
- Sharing program results, impact and accomplishments, including presenting at conferences
- Reimbursement of personal costs incurred such as use of personal cell phones and mileage

For more information on different compensation models for CHW programs, check MHP Salud’s website to see its compensation model handout, **Promotores(as): Volunteers, Contractors or Staff.**

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