



MILKEN
INSTITUTE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Effective yet Undervalued: Elevating Community Health Workers

Community health workers (CHWs) are frontline public health workers who are trusted members of and/or have an unusually close understanding of the community that they serve. Given this trust, they have proven effective for community intervention, including health education, clinical care extension, and community-based research. Numerous trials have shown them to be cost-effective. Despite these facts, they continue to be underutilized, while expenditures for poor health outcomes continue to increase.

Milken Institute Public Health conducted focus groups with 17 CHWs in two comparable cities—Philadelphia and Baltimore. From these groups, six main themes emerged:

1. **what CHWs say to each other about the job,**
2. **limited-resource clients and ballooning caseloads,**
3. **job stresses and coping approaches,**
4. **being part of the health-care team,**
5. **opportunities to effect change, and**
6. **the dark side of this work.**

Each of these themes contained subthemes that further refined the issues identified. The CHW feedback was also contrasted with the observations published in the biomedical literature, with which there was often non-concurrence.

Feedback from the focus groups was analyzed, and four recommendations emerged to address the challenges faced by CHWs across these six domains:

1. **Improve health-care team integration.**
2. **Improve compensation and service reimbursement.**
3. **Adjust the caseloads.**
4. **Provide mental health and work support.**

Each of these recommendations includes suggested steps and identifies the main enactors of such changes. Responses to these needs must also be innovative and informed by community trials of interventions as diverse as companion robots and artificial intelligence.

CHWs and the populations they serve will continue to face significant challenges. Without better compensation, work and mental health support, and smaller caseloads, the demands upon the systems that deploy CHWs will lead to a decline in their numbers at a time when projections confirm a sustained increase in demand. We simply must do better.

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