



“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.”¹

Community Health Promoters Keys to a Successful Program

What is a community health promoter?

Health promoters are also known as community health workers, lay health navigators, health advocates, and, in Spanish, as promotores de salud. They are volunteer, trained lay health educators, who share the cultural, linguistic, and demographic characteristics of the community that the program is attempting to reach, usually a group that has traditionally lacked access to adequate health care.

What can health promoters do?

Although each program has different goals and objectives, health promoters provide culturally and linguistically competent outreach, education, referral, and advocacy in their communities to increase awareness and understanding of health issues and use of appropriate services. They serve as connectors between communities and the health care system, providing informal counseling and social support and assuring that people get the services that they need. Using participatory educational methods and interventions, they help community members to put new knowledge into practice.²

What evidence shows the effectiveness of health promoters?

A growing body of literature supports the unique role of community health promoters in strengthening existing community networks for care, providing community members with social support, education, and facilitating access to care and communities with a stimulus for action.³ The use of promoters in health intervention programs has been associated with improved health care access, prenatal care, pregnancy and birth outcomes, client health status, health- and screening-related behaviors, appropriate diabetes care, as well as reduced health care costs.⁴ Programs using lay health advisors have demonstrated the ability to increase community-wide use of screening mammography among low-income, rural populations.⁵ In addition, the approaches used by health promoters, such as in-person outreach through home visits and community education activities, have been rated by states as the most effective techniques for increasing enrollment in state child health insurance programs.⁶ Other techniques employed by promoters, such as creating social networks that provide supportive relationships for positive behavior change (e.g., setting up walking groups to provide friendship and support), are proven strategies for getting people to be more physically active.⁷

What are additional advantages of health promoter programs?

Health promoters understand and address the socio-cultural aspects of health beliefs, values, and behaviors of the community they are from. Utilizing the assets and protective factors of a community, promoter programs promote health and increase prevention consciousness.

Promoters can overcome language, class, and status barriers that often characterize physician-client relationships, and at the same time, educate providers about the community’s health needs and the cultural relevancy of interventions. Programs using promoters build and strengthen partnerships with trusted community-based institutions, such as churches, and develop leadership and individual and community capacity.

“Programs to support the use of community health workers, especially among medically underserved and racial and ethnic minority populations, should be expanded, evaluated, and replicated.”⁸

REFERENCES

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- ⁷ Task Force on Community Preventive Services. 2002. “Providing Social Support in Community Settings is Strongly Recommended to Promote Physical Activity.” In: *The Guide to Community Preventive Services*. www.thecommunityguide.org.
- ⁸ Smedley BD, Stith AY, Nelson, AR. Op. cit., p. 195

What is needed to establish and maintain a successful health promoter program?

Realizing the potential of health promoter programs requires substantial investment in human resource development and institutional capacity building. Essential components of a successful health promoter program include:

Program infrastructure

- An institutional “home” for the promoters, which could be a community-based organization, a governmental agency, or a partnership of institutions.
- Baseline research to assess community needs and to design and develop the promoter interventions.
- Clear definition of promoter activities and simple messages.
- Community access to services being promoted.
- A promoter job description, with clear roles and responsibilities, specifying what promoters can and cannot do and their right to supportive supervision.
- Selection criteria for promoters, indicating desired skills and personal characteristics.
- Recognition and incentives for promoters, including stipends, childcare, “program identity” items (e.g., t-shirts, caps, identification badges), ceremonies of recognition, and additional training opportunities.
- Technical, programmatic, and financial support for collaborating organizations to increase institutional capacity in design, management, and evaluation of community health promoter programs.

Management and coordination

- A dynamic, caring, competent, and knowledgeable program coordinator.
- Coordination of referrals with collaborating agencies and established feedback mechanisms.
- Linkages with other outreach activities (e.g., mass media campaigns) to ensure complementarities.
- Ongoing liaison with program collaborating agencies.

Training

- Culturally and linguistically appropriate promoter training curricula, with specific knowledge and skills learning objectives; ample time for practice applying skills; participatory training methodologies using principles of popular education; and pre and post tests.
- Regular refresher / in-service training sessions for promoters.

Supervision and support

- Supportive supervision and quality assurance systems, including regular promoter meetings with coordinator to assess activities and plan new ones.
- Mechanisms to facilitate constructive criticism among health promoters.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Program monitoring and evaluation framework, with simple record keeping forms.
- Clearly defined goals and objectives.

