



THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER SERVICES IN COVID-19 RESPONSE EFFORTS

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that Black and Hispanic Connecticut residents were experiencing higher infection and mortality rates than the overall population. To support local public health agencies in their COVID-19 response, the Connecticut Health Foundation developed a grant opportunity for local health departments to use community health worker services in their pandemic response. To understand the effectiveness of this approach, a team from the UMass Chan Medical School, Commonwealth Medicine division, conducted an evaluation.



WHAT HAPPENED?

Five local health departments – Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, Norwalk, and Stamford – used grant funds to hire community health workers (CHWs). In each city, CHWs helped with the COVID-19 response in different ways, tailored to local needs. In some cities, CHWs helped link people who were exposed to COVID-19 to services and supports to allow them to safely quarantine. CHWs also conducted contact tracing, supported testing sites and vaccination clinics, and developed and shared educational materials.

WHY COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS?

Community health workers are public health outreach professionals who can serve as a bridge between people and the clinical care and social service systems. They often share a common background with the people they serve and their work emphasizes relationship-building and trust.

There is considerable evidence that CHWs can improve health outcomes and contain health care costs. Less is known about how they can contribute to public health emergencies, but their roles as trusted members of their communities mean they are well-positioned to convey emergency messages that help protect the most vulnerable residents.

This evaluation helped to test the hypothesis that by helping to meet the needs of people who were exposed to COVID-19 and allowing them to quarantine or isolate, CHWs helped to reduce the impact of the virus.

WHAT DID THE EVALUATION FIND?

Community health workers effectively met people's needs. Surveys of both community health workers and the people they served found that the CHWs effectively met people's

medical and non-medical needs. In addition, both groups believed the initiative was helpful and had a positive impact.

The CHW interventions in Danbury and Norwalk likely averted COVID-19 cases. An analysis of data from two of the health departments – Danbury and Norwalk – allowed evaluators to estimate the effect of the CHW services on reducing the spread of COVID-19. By meeting the needs of people who needed to quarantine or isolate following an exposure to COVID-19, community health workers helped to avoid 59% of the COVID-19 cases that might otherwise have occurred.

The averted cases in Danbury and Norwalk likely offset the cost of the CHW interventions. Avoiding additional COVID-19 cases also reduced costs that would have otherwise been spent on treatment. The projected savings from reducing the spread of COVID-19 were more than the cost of the CHW intervention. In other words, the cost of the CHW services more than paid for itself through reduced health care costs.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF THE EVALUATION?

The evaluators note that the analysis was limited by having a small sample size and being based on research that is still developing. As a result, the findings might be difficult to generalize to other populations.

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT EACH CITY DID AND THE ANALYSIS DONE IN THE EVALUATION?

The full brief, “The Role of Community Health Worker Services in COVID-19 Response Efforts,” is available at www.cthealth.org. The brief includes details on the approaches each city took, data on the cost of each activity, and information on the survey findings and analysis of averted cases and costs.