

# Connecting to care

## The role of community health workers in the continuum of care

INTERVIEWED BY ADAM BURROUGHS

**C**ommunity health workers are on the frontlines of public health. These trusted individuals know their communities, which enable them to connect people to the various health and social services available to them.

"They know the community and they know the barriers its members face to access care and services," says Marquita L. Rockamore, director of health industry solutions at Corporate College, a division of Cuyahoga Community College.

She says financial and racial inequities affect how people are served, their access to care and the quality of care delivered. Community health workers address those inequalities by helping members of their communities navigate service providers to find the care they need.

*Smart Business* spoke with Rockamore about community health workers and their role in the continuum of care.

### Who typically employs community health workers and what services do they provide?

Community workers serve as a vital lifeline to members of the community who need care, but may not have the ability to access it. They connect the dots between insurance, health care providers and pharmacies to make sure all medical needs are being met.

Nonprofit community agencies and municipalities employ community health workers, as do county departments of health, clinics and managed care organizations. Hospitals have patient navigators who have unique training, but offer many of the same services as other community health workers.

Increasingly, community health workers are being employed to help close the digital divide. That work focuses on teaching members of the community, seniors especially, how to use computers

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WEBSITE: Learn more about community health workers by visiting [www.tri-c.edu/CommunityHealthWorker](http://www.tri-c.edu/CommunityHealthWorker).

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and software to create or access electronic health records. This can help them better understand the details of their health conditions and take action to make improvements.

### How are differences in the titles and educational backgrounds of community health workers affecting the industry?

The industry is suffering from an identity crisis. Community health workers are known by a host of names — outreach workers, liaisons and more. But it's bigger than a name. There are also differences in how community health workers operate, which makes it difficult to capture performance data or streamline education and training.

Another issue is the level of certification or academic degree employers and insurance companies would like community health workers to have. For example, in some cases, a community health worker can be employed with a high school diploma and a certification, but an insurance company might require a bachelor's degree to reimburse an employer for those services, so there's a disconnect.

As communities continue to address opioid addiction, the digital divide and inequities of care, there is a greater need for homogeneity in the industry to better provide and pay for the community health care workers who can connect people to much needed services.



### What challenges are employers facing when it comes to connecting with or retaining community health workers?

There are barriers that are affecting if and how community health workers are employed. Employers sometimes aren't sure how to get reimbursed for the services of community health workers. That can be as simple as not understanding which code to use to get reimbursed for those services.

Employers want to hire certified community health workers, but equally as important is hiring individuals who can communicate with the many different types of people who are served, as well as those who deliver care or reimburse for services rendered. Employers prefer to deploy someone who mirrors the demographics of a particular community, knows the neighborhoods and can relate and communicate to those being helped. It can be a challenge to find those who fit that description.

There are many people hurting for resources. Some are trying to juggle caring for a family member while going to school or working full time. There are many people who need services and don't know where to get them, often despite living in a resource-rich community. Community health workers can make those connections for those who don't know where to turn. ●