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Innovative Health Care Provider Roles

Recruiting and retaining rural health care professionals can be challenging. Yet despite these challenges, innovative rural communities strive to deliver health care along the care continuum creatively and efficiently. One rural health workforce strategy being used to address these challenges is to employ community members in new health care capacities or expand current care provider roles to include new tasks and responsibilities. This paper considers five categories of these kinds of positions that may benefit rural people and places: community health workers, community paramedics, patient advocates, health coaches and dental therapists. Dental therapists currently practice in only a few states but have potential for expansion.

COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

Community health workers (CHWs) (sometimes called promotores/promotoras de salud or community health representatives) are community members who build relationships with community members to serve as a bridge between communities and health care providers. CHWs do not necessarily have specific in-depth clinical education; rather they work in association with local health care providers to connect community members with health and social resources and provide education and support. CHWs share characteristics with people they serve (such as ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, or past experiences), enhancing their ability to connect with the community and serving an important role in helping to address social determinants of health. In rural communities, where recruiting providers can be challenging and distances to the nearest provider can be significant, CHWs serve as “connectors” between community members and the traditional health care team. Services provided by CHWs include the following:

- Providing culturally appropriate and accessible health education and information,
- Ensuring that people get the services they need,
- Providing informal counseling and social support,
- Advocating for individuals and communities within the health and social service systems,
- Providing direct services (such as basic first aid) and administering health screening tests, and
- Building individual and community capacity.





Since 2014, state Medicaid agencies have been able to reimburse for services provided by a wider range of health care professionals, including CHWs. In that time, the field has seen growing professionalization, with certification training and requirements emerging in several states. Payment and differing certification requirements are a few of the factors contributing to variability in CHW programs across the country.

Community Health Worker Resources

- Newsletter, webinars, professional development opportunities and more through membership with the National Association of Community Health Workers: <https://nachw.org/>
- A variety of publications, including certification requirements by state. Search for “Community Health Worker” under all topics: <https://www.cthealth.org/publications/resources/>
- Rural Community Health Workers Toolkit Modular toolkit for developing a CHW program in a rural setting, including best practices and how to plan for sustainability: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/community-health-workers>
- Rural Care Coordination Toolkit – Types of Care Coordinators – Community Health Workers: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/care-coordination/2/care-coordinator-model/community-health-workers>
- Social Determinants of Health in Rural Communities Toolkit – Interdisciplinary Care Teams, Patient Navigators, and Community Health Workers: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/sdoh/2/healthcare-settings/care-teams>

COMMUNITY PARAMEDICS

Community paramedics are emergency medical services (EMS) personnel with expanded training and roles. In rural areas, community paramedics fill system gaps by providing health care services to underserved populations and/or those living in areas with poor geographic access to clinics, hospitals, and other providers. Community paramedic programs train EMS personnel at the appropriate level to serve communities more broadly in the areas of primary care, public health, disease management, prevention and wellness, mental health, and dental care. Between emergency calls, community paramedics provide important health care services, bridging gaps between the community and traditional health care providers.

Community Paramedic Resources

- Community Paramedic Program: <http://communityparamedic.org/>
- Free program handbook to guide local development of a Community Paramedic Program: <http://communityparamedic.org/ProgramHandbook.aspx>





- A policy brief and report that outlines the evidence base for community paramedicine and the role of a community paramedic, and some case studies of current programs: <http://www.flexmonitoring.org/publications/bp34/>
- Community Paramedicine Topic Guide: Describes and links community paramedicine tools and resources: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/community-paramedicine>
- Rural Community Paramedicine Toolkit: Compiles emerging practices and resources to support rural communities seeking to build community paramedicine and mobile integrated health programs across the United States. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/community-paramedicine>
- Community Paramedicine Pilot Programs: Lessons from Maine: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/ems/4/>
- Community Paramedicine Impact Reference Guide – a resource for those intending to research, plan, implement, evaluate, or otherwise consider community paramedicine: <https://www.ruralcenter.org/resource-library/community-paramedicine-impact-reference-guide>

PATIENT NAVIGATORS

The terms “patient advocate,” “patient representative,” and “patient navigator” (not to be confused with the health insurance exchange patient navigators associated with the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act) are often used interchangeably. As the name suggests, patient navigators help patients navigate the health care system, including enhancing communication and understanding between providers and patients/families. Whereas CHWs are representatives of or closely tied to the community they work in, patient navigators may be more likely to have a focus area, such as chronic disease, care coordination, or insurance/financial help.

Patient Advocate Resources

- Rural case study about the development and use of a patient navigator position: <http://www.gcruralhealth.com/Portals/0/PHIR%20Presentation%20Final%20-%20GCRHN%20Patient%20Navigator%20web.pdf> (see some best practices for rural on slide 48)
- The Patient Navigator Training Collaborative including training models and FAQs about jobs for patient navigators: <http://patientnavigatortraining.org/>
- Rural Care Coordination Toolkit – Types of Care Coordinators – Patient Navigators: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/care-coordination/2/care-coordinator-model/patient-navigators>
- Social Determinants of Health in Rural Communities Toolkit – Interdisciplinary Care Teams, Patient Navigators, and Community Health Workers: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/sdoh/2/healthcare-settings/care-teams>





HEALTH COACHES

Health coaches are either traditional health care professionals (ranging from counselors to social workers to nurses to therapists) or lay community members who work with individuals to improve health and healthy behavior. They may be able to offer some of the same support services as a patient navigator, but health coaches expressly work with patients to improve their health and well-being.

Health Coach Resources

- An innovative rural model that uses trained health coaches to provide education and advocacy for a patient's overall health in four target areas: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/resources/9876>
- A journal article that describes a pilot study using community volunteers as health coaches to improve chronic disease self-management: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/resources/11346>
- The National Society of Health Coaches: <http://www.nshcoa.com/>
- Is Coaching Billable? https://www.nshcoa.com/pdf/CPT_CODE_FACTS_Coaching_Patients.pdf

DENTAL THERAPISTS

Dental therapists are dental professionals who may practice basic dentistry under the supervision of a dentist. Dental therapists expand dental care to underserved populations, including those in rural places. Although the role exists throughout Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, dental therapy is only practiced in a handful of states. In some states, dental therapists are only authorized to practice in tribal communities, whereas in other states, they are utilized more broadly to serve those who are uninsured and underserved, and those in dental shortage areas. The number of states exploring dental therapy as an opportunity to improve dental access is increasing.

Dental Therapist Resources

- Minnesota Dental Therapy Toolkits
 - Summary of Dental Therapy Regulatory and Payment Processes
<https://www.health.state.mn.us/facilities/ruralhealth/emerging/docs/dtreg2016.pdf>
 - A Resource for Potential Employers
<https://www.health.state.mn.us/facilities/ruralhealth/emerging/dt/docs/2017dttool.pdf>
- Dental therapy in Alaska: <http://www.anthc.org/chs/chap/dhs/>
- An article describing dental therapy in both Alaska and Minnesota:
<http://www.commonwealthfund.org/Newsletters/States-in-Action/2010/Mar/March-April-2010/Snapshots/Alaska-and-Minnesota.aspx>





- What are Dental Therapists? FAQs: <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2019/10/09/what-are-dental-therapists>
- A U.S. map reflecting state use of dental therapy: <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2016/09/28/states-expand-the-use-of-dental-therapy>

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