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. Community health workers, community paramedics, patient advocates, and health coaches are four new health care provider types that may benefit rural people and places. Dental therapists are a new type of health care provider that currently practice in only a few states, but have potential for expansion.

COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

Community health workers (CHWs) are community members who provide health care services but who do not have specific in-depth health education. CHWs work in association with a local health care system and often share characteristics with people they serve (such as ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, or past experiences). 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:

- Providing culturally appropriate and accessible health education and information, often by using popular education methods;
- 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.

Community Health Worker Resources

- Modular toolkit for developing a CHW program in a rural setting, including best practices: http://www.raconline.org/communityhealth/chw/
- Research and guidance regarding sustainable financing for CHW positions: http://futurehealth.ucsf.edu/Content/29/2006-12_Advancing_Community_Health_Worker_Practice_and_Utilization_The_Focus_on_Financing.pdf
- The Alaskan Community Health Aid/Practitioner program: http://www.akchap.org/html/home-page.html

COMMUNITY PARAMEDICS

Community paramedics are emergency medical services personnel with expanded training and roles. In rural areas, community paramedics fill gaps in the health care system by providing health care services to underserved populations and/or those living in areas with poor geographic access to clinics, hospitals, and other providers/facilities. The community paramedic program trains 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. During “down-time” between emergency calls, EMS personnel provide important bridging health care services (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
- An innovative example of a community paramedic pilot in California (some rural coverage): http://futurehealth.ucsf.edu/Public/Center-Research/Home.aspx?pid=713
- 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/
- A topic guide from the Rural Assistance Center that describes and links community paramedicine tools and resources: http://www.raconline.org/topics/community-paramedicine
PATIENT ADVOCATES
The terms “patient advocate,” “patient representative,” and “patient navigator” (not to be confused with the Health Insurance Exchange Patient Navigators associated with the Affordable Care Act) are often used interchangeably. Patient advocates help navigate communication and understanding between provider(s) and patients/family. Patient advocates are similar to CHWs in that they provide culturally relevant connections and communication with a health system, but patient advocates often can provide more specific services (care coordination, health education, insurance/financial help, etc.) than CHWs.

Patient Advocate Resources
- FAQ about jobs for Patient Navigators: http://patientnavigatortraining.org/network/career/

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. While patient advocates help patients and families communicate with and navigate the health system, they do not work to specifically improve patients’ health or behavior beyond this. Health coaches expressly work with patients to improve their health and well-being.

Health Coach Resources
- An innovative rural example that uses community health coaches to reduce readmissions among those with chronic conditions: http://www.raonline.org/success/project-examples/375/
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. Currently in the United States, only Alaska and Minnesota allow dental therapists to practice, although the role exists in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. Dental therapists in Alaska solely serve remote and rural locations, while those in Minnesota serve the uninsured and underserved, and those in dental shortage areas.

Dental Therapist Resources
- Dental Therapy program at the University of Minnesota: http://www.dentistry.umn.edu/programs-admissions/dental-therapy/
- Dental Health Aide Therapist program in Alaska: http://depts.washington.edu/dentexak/
- Dental therapy in Alaska: http://www.anthc.org/chs/chap/dhs/