



Supporting Community Health

Community Health Workers Making an Impact with IRIS

Contributors:

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Community Health Workers (CHWs) are trusted members of a community who draw upon their knowledge and local relationships to further the health of residents. Described as cultural brokers, CHWs typically reside in the community they serve and are uniquely positioned to connect community members with health and social service systems. In this way, CHWs play an essential role in their community by helping residents navigate health systems, coordinating their care, making connections to resources, and advocating for all aspects of residents' health (Brooks et al., 2014).

Integral to the services that CHWs provide is the skill to navigate complex systems. When CHWs have access to closed loop referral systems like IRIS, they can better assist their local population by making more effective connections to health and social service programs. In communities where resources are often limited, IRIS has helped eliminate barriers to collaboration and build relationships that extend beyond individual referrals. Molly Peters, local champion for the Illinois Collaboration and Action IRIS Network and representative of the Greene County Health Department, shares how using IRIS has brought together various providers in healthcare, public health, social services agencies and beyond that have historically worked independently of one another.

"[IRIS] has transformed referrals from simple handoffs into closed-loop connections... [creating] a trusted network in which partners work together to address the social drivers of health, improve access to care, and ensure that no one falls through the cracks. The result is a more connected, resilient community with a shared commitment to improving health outcomes for individuals and families." - **Molly Peters, Public Health Administrator, Greene County Health Department**

Participating in collaborative community processes in which organizations share a vision, expectations, and workflows cultivate partnerships based on familiarity, accountability, and common goals. Clients are directly impacted when trust is built through accountability. However, mere knowledge of community resources doesn't directly translate to successful connections on behalf of clients. The ability to monitor and track clients' referral progress, combined with the accountability IRIS network partners develop through shared expectations and transparent referral outcome data, fosters CHWs' trust in referring clients to less-familiar partners. It is trusting relationships that enable CHWs to facilitate access to services and improve the quality and competency of service delivery.

"IRIS has streamlined how we are able to connect our clients to services. Having [this] tool reduces the burden on our clients. Chasing down those needed services is overwhelming and

time-consuming, and it is comforting to know we have this as an option.” - Amanda McKinley,
Community Health Worker of the Year

Keeping the importance of trusted navigators in mind, the Illinois Public Health Association's Community Health Worker of the Year Award recognizes individuals who exemplify the very best of the CHW profession through exceptional leadership, dedication, and service. More than an individual achievement, the award highlights the essential role CHW's play as trusted community connectors – bridging health care, public health, and social services while advocating for individuals and families. By recognizing outstanding CHW's, the award also brings greater visibility to a workforce that is critical to improving access to care, strengthening communities, and advancing healthier outcomes across Illinois.

Receiving this award, Amanda McKinley, Greene County Health Department shared how honored she was to be given this award and what this means for her personally and professionally. She emphasizes that *“knowing the work I am doing is being recognized statewide, is so humbling...I have always been a Community Health Worker. Throughout many years, I assisted my parents, helping them navigate the complicated systems that continued to evolve as they aged. Now, I am helping others feel empowered to be proactive in their own lives.”*

Through IRIS, CHWs can further client agency by sharing clear information about service options, explaining eligibility requirements and potential accessibility barriers, and reviewing what to expect from the service providers clients are connected to. All together, they strategize toward the “big picture” by addressing systematic challenges. Their knowledge and understanding of the collaboration landscape supports their roles and organization in providing partner service and resource coordination to their community.

CHWs improve access to care through advocacy, education, connections, and trust that advances both individual and community health. The roles and responsibilities of CHWs align naturally with IRIS' values. In placing value on and amplifying the voices of families and partners, we recognize that CHWs offer opportunities likely to strengthen the family experience and increase positive community outcomes. The connections built both in and outside of IRIS provide an opportunity for all community organizations to cultivate partner relationships, building a strong net to ensure families are seen, heard, and provided with quality care and resources.

Resources

Brooks, B.A., Davis, S., Frank-Lightfoot, L., Kulbok, P.A., Poree, S., & Sgarlata, L. (2014). Building a community health worker program: The key to better care, better outcomes, & lower costs. *Community Health Works*, 6-11.