



CHW IMPACT: OBESITY

THE PROBLEM

The worldwide prevalence of obesity has nearly doubled over the past 3 decades.¹ In the United States, 38.3% of women and 34.3% of men are obese.¹ Obesity adversely impacts blood pressure, insulin resistance and cholesterol levels, leading to serious conditions such as cardiovascular, type 2 diabetes, cancers, and gallbladder disease.² In 2005, the CDC estimated that 365,000 Americans die each year from obesity.² Managing obesity is challenging and demands dramatic lifestyle changes. These challenges are magnified for members of marginalized communities who face additional social, structural, and environmental barriers to disease management.

References

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The Role of CHWs in Combating Obesity

Community Health Workers (CHWs) are public health workers with strong connections to the communities they serve. Their close bonds with community members allow them to serve as liaisons between health/social services and the community, facilitating access to services and improving service delivery to better meet community needs.³ CHWs help patients navigate the healthcare system, communicate with providers, set goals, and adhere to lifestyle changes through meetings and home visits.³

Through community education, informal counseling, social support, and the promotion of healthy lifestyle habits such as healthy eating and physical activity, CHWs help reduce obesity in the communities that they serve.⁴ Community-based CHW interventions result in improved dietary habits and increased physical activity.^{5,6} Several studies have shown that patients who receive support and health education from CHWs experience significant improvements in weight control,^{4,7,8} BMI,⁴ and waist circumference.^{4,5} The positive effect of CHWs on weight control has been documented in a variety of contexts, including high-risk Black and Latino communities.^{5,7,8}

In its 2011 report, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends expanding CHW workforce, especially to reach racial and ethnic minorities and other underserved populations, to improve health outcomes and reduce healthcare disparities.⁹ The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act similarly recognizes CHWs as valuable members of care teams, and allocates funds to support and expand CHW programming.¹⁰

CHWs Addressing Diabetes in Michigan

A variety of CHW-led obesity interventions are being developed, implemented, and evaluated in Michigan. A CHW intervention in Southwest Detroit called Healthy Mothers on the Move (MOMs) successfully improved pregnant Latinas' dietary habits.¹¹ The Walk Your Heart to Health program established walking groups for Black and Latino residents of Detroit and significantly lowered participants' BMI and waist circumference.⁸ The Michigan Community Health Worker Alliance (MiCHWA) continues to work with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services' (MDHHS) Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Unit to help agencies hire, train, and support CHWs so they can better support individuals and communities with obesity.

The Michigan Community Health Worker Alliance (MiCHWA) works to promote and sustain the integration of community health workers (CHWs) into health and human services organizations throughout Michigan through coordinated changes in policy and workforce development. Learn more about MiCHWA at www.michwa.org.

¹⁰The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. *U.S. Government Printing Office website*. <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ148/html/PLAW-111publ148.htm>. Accessed December 1, 2016.

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