

# Complementary Roles and Training of Health Education Specialists & Community Health Workers

Health education specialists and community health workers (CHWs) are two valuable occupations that improve the health of individuals and communities. They have complementary roles in addressing the demands created by the Affordable Care Act and in strengthening individual and community capacity through patient and community education, patient navigation, referrals, social support, advocacy and other activities. Although their training and qualifications differ, they work in tandem, often with health educators supervising the development and delivery of programs and services provided by CHWs.



## HEALTH EDUCATION SPECIALIST

### Definition

Health education specialists, also called health educators, educate people about behaviors that promote wellness. They develop and implement strategies to improve the health of individuals, families and communities.

### Education & Training

At a minimum, health educators have a bachelor's degree and many have advanced degrees or certification. The Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) designation signifies that an individual has met eligibility requirements for and has successfully passed a competency-based examination demonstrating skill and knowledge of the Seven Areas of Responsibility of Health Education Specialists, upon which credential is based. MCHES, the master's level of certification, includes a set of advanced eligibility requirements.

### Typical Roles

- Assess health/social service needs of people and communities
- Using evidence-based research, develop policies, programs and materials to improve the health of individuals or populations
- Educate people how to cope with or manage existing health conditions and access services
- Develop and lead grant-funded initiatives
- Deliver training for other professionals and CHWs
- Supervise health promotion staff
- Collect, analyze and report data
- Evaluate programs, services and materials for quality improvement and health care efficiencies
- Lead coalitions and healthcare-community partnerships
- Advocate for improved health resources and policies

### Selected Skills

- Evaluation and survey research
- Program design and management
- Coalition building, policy/systems change
- Health literacy, health communications, social media
- Curriculum development and training
- Motivational interviewing, behavior change methods
- Capacity building at institutional or societal levels

## COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER

### Definition

A Community Health Worker (CHW) is a frontline public health worker who is a trusted member of and/or has an unusually close understanding of the community served. This trusting relationship enable the CHW to serve as a liaison/line/intermediary between health/social services and the community to facilitate access to serves and improve the quality and cultural competence of service delivery. Some other titles may include lay health advisors, community health advocates and promotores de salud.

### Education & Training

Requirements for CHWs vary, although they typically have at least a high school diploma and must complete a brief period of on-the-job training. Some states have programs offered through community colleges or have specific certification requirements.

### Typical Roles

- Provide outreach and discuss health care concerns with patients or community members
- Educate people about the importance and availability of healthcare services, such as cancer screenings
- Collect information or data needed by health administrators or providers
- Provide informal counseling and social support
- Help people connect with needed community services
- Ensure that people have access to the healthcare services they need
- Advocate for individual and community needs
- Help individuals enroll in or understand their health insurance options
- Serve as a liaison between community members and health/social service providers

### Selected Skills

- Cross-cultural communication
- Language translation
- Interpersonal relations
- Service coordination
- Teaching, disseminating information
- Patient advocacy, empowerment
- Capacity building
- Outreach methods and strategies



**Society for Public Health Education**

10 G Street, Suite 605  
Washington, DC 20002  
[www.sophe.org](http://www.sophe.org)

**References:** Society for Public Health Education, *What is a Health Education Specialist?*; Department of Labor 2014 Occupational Outlook Handbook, *Health Educators and Community Health Workers*; American Public Health Association, *Community Health Worker definition*; National Community Health Advisor Study (Univ. of Arizona, 1998), p. 6; CDC Community Health Workers/Promotores de Salud: Critical Connections in Communities; Community Health Initiative of Boston, *Core Competencies of Community Health Workers*.