



Complementary roles and training of Health education specialists & Community health workers

Health education specialists and community health workers are valuable occupations that improve the health of individuals and communities.

These occupations have complementary roles in addressing health care demands and 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 together, often with health educators supervising the development and delivery of programs and services provided by community health workers.

Health Education Specialists

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

Education and Training

At a minimum, health educators have a bachelor's degree. Many have advanced degrees or certification.

The Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES®) designation signifies that an individual has met eligibility requirements for and 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.
- Use evidence-based research to develop policies, programs and materials that improve individual and population health.
- Evaluate programs, services and materials for quality improvement and health care efficiencies.
- Collect, analyze and report data.
- Educate people on how to cope and manage existing health conditions and gain access to services.
- Lead coalitions and healthcare-community partnerships.
- Develop and lead grant-funded initiatives.
- Deliver training for other professionals and community health workers.
- Supervise health promotion staff.
- Advocate for improved health resources and policies.

Selected Skills

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

Community Health Workers

Community health workers are frontline, trusted public health workers with a close understanding of the community they serve. Examples of community health workers are health advisors, community health advocates and promotores de salud. They serve as liaisons between health/social services and the community to improve the quality and cultural competence of service delivery.

Education and Training

Requirements for community health workers 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.
- Collect information and 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 needed healthcare services.
- Advocate for individual and community needs.
- Help individuals enroll in and understand their health insurance options.
- Serve as a liaison between community members and health/

Selected Skills

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

References: Society for Public Health Education, 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.