

CHW: THE FUTURE OF THIS WORKFORCE

Community Health Workers (CHWs) are frontline health workers with a close and trusted relationship with the communities they serve.

They work in healthcare and community services and under a variety of job titles including, health educator, patient navigator, outreach worker and care coordinator. In Montana, the Community Health Representative (CHR) program, a founding CHW program through Indian Health Services has been around since 1968.



CHW: the future of this workforce

CHWs have a long history in Montana, beginning with the CHR program developed in 1968. The term CHW was not commonly used or understood in Montana until decades later. The first CHW training was created in 2017 by the Montana Area Health Education Center and Office of Rural Health, with funding from the Montana Healthcare Foundation and support from federal grants, including the Health Resources and Services Administration Behavioral Health Workforce Training grants.

Since then, the University of Montana's Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development started a CHW training (2023), House Bill 850, a bill to enact state-wide CHW licensure, passed the legislature but was vetoed by the Governor in the 2025 Legislative Session, the Montana Community Health Worker Association was founded (2026) and both Universities have trained over 600 individuals as CHWs.

A Growing Workforce: 55% of CHWs Surveyed have Three Years or Less of Experience.

Another 19% have been a CHW for 3-5 years. 15% have been a CHW for 5-10 years and 7.5% have been a CHW for 10-20 years. The remaining CHWs surveyed have been a CHW for more than 20 years.

CHW Workforce Stability: 66% of CHWs surveyed intend to stay in the CHW workforce for the next 2 years.

25% of CHWs are unsure if they will remain, suggesting an opportunity to better understand and address retention challenges. **9%** of CHW respondents intend to leave the CHW workforce.

The same CHWs were asked what their top two professional development opportunities are:

67%

want an increased salary

61%

want increased training opportunities as a CHW (continued education)

31%

want training options to become a different type of public or healthcare worker (ex. nurse, physician, licensed clinical social worker, masters of public health)

20%

want to enter supervision and/or management roles

While 67% want an increased salary and 20% are interested in promotions to supervision and management roles, only 50% stated that they are eligible for promotions and pay increases at their work.

26% of CHWs are not sure if they are eligible and 22% state they are not eligible for pay increases or promotions.



While increased salary and promotions are important to CHWs, 39% of them are in grant-funded positions. Grants are a short-term source of funding. Positions hired via grants are often ineligible for raises and often end when the grant period ends.

19% are funded through state, county, city and tribal government funds. Only 14% are funded through payer sources like Medicaid, Medicare and private insurance.

National Support for CHWs is Growing. Montana has an Opportunity to Catch Up.

Montana Medicaid doesn't have a clear reimbursement strategy for CHWs, whereas over 50% of Medicaid plans in other states cover CHW services and have state CHW licensure.¹



In the Rural Healthcare Transformation Program (RHTP), the Federal Government recommended including CHWs to 'Help rural providers practice at the top of their license and develop a broader set of providers to serve a rural community's needs.'² Over 32 states, Montana not included, proposed CHWs initiatives within their application to address chronic disease, build the healthcare workforce and address access to care in rural America.³

Montana has the opportunity to implement CHW licensure, integrate CHWs into innovative care models to save Medicaid dollars, extend the healthcare workforce and improve health outcomes across rural Montana.

1. 50-state scan of Medicaid payment for community health workers | CT Health Foundation
2. Rural Health Transformation (RHT) Program | CMS
3. Rural Health Transformation Program: State Focus on Community Health Workers - NASHP