



MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE

The fifth component (building block) of community health worker programs is management and maintenance. To manage and maintain community health workers, managers must address team-building, the unique contributions of community health workers, two-way communication, recordkeeping, quality assurance, skills development, and recognition and incentives. Managers must ensure and monitor the quality of work done by community health workers.

Management and maintenance of community health workers require development of a relationship that strikes a balance between typical supervision and mentoring. Acknowledgment and recognition are important in maintaining this relationship as is respect for the cultural norms of the community. Managers also communicate the special contributions of community health workers to all program staff members to gain initial buy-in.

Team-Building

All staff members of health and social services agencies need to recognize the contributions made by community health workers and accept them as key members of a team. Participation in a team effort helps to retain and motivate community health workers. Community health workers know whether they are perceived as valued members of a team. Obtaining “buy-in” from all staff—including health care providers (e.g., nurses, social workers, doctors), managers, and administrative personnel of the program—is needed to create successful programs. When “buy-in” is present, community health workers are recognized as a key part of the program and valued for their contributions.

Community health workers have common experiences with each other and with other health professionals. Identifying common experiences enhances team-building as does offering group activities (e.g., inservice training, retreats, brown-bag lunches) that focus on team-building.

The Unique Contributions of Community Health Workers

Recognizing the unique contributions community health workers make to a program promotes team-building and teamwork and enhances workers’ self-esteem and confidence. Recognition can be provided in a variety of ways.

Communicating Clearly. Community health workers know their community and are usually highly trusted. As a result, they can communicate clearly and address perceived barriers and current concerns of their clients.

Community health workers also can communicate messages regarded as important by the health agency. They can decide how to meet job requirements in culturally acceptable ways and advise the program appropriately.

Responding to Individuals and the Community. Community health workers understand the unique needs of individuals and can act accordingly. If they are of the same ethnic group or community, they have a shared history and understanding of their community’s cultural context for health and illness. They also know of their community’s dealings with the health care delivery system.

When community health workers enter the life of a woman and her family, they are involved on a personal level. They cannot walk away or ignore the needs of those people just because they have a specific job or goal. This level of caring endears community health workers to the community and results in cooperation when they ask their clients to come in for cancer screening.

Problemsolving. One of the greatest skills and contributions of community health workers is their problemsolving ability. They are concerned with helping the intended audience and their family in a holistic way. Their roles—health education, social support, referral to services, and advocacy—are all interconnected.

Flexible Schedules. Community health workers generally have flexible schedules, allowing them to work evenings and weekends to visit people in their natural settings (e.g., homes, church meetings, markets). This increases their ability to reach members of the intended audience.

Two-Way Communication

The roles and responsibilities of the manager of community health workers include starting two-way communication between community health workers and other staff members.

Creating Organizational Practices. Several organizational practices ensure regular communication as well as respect and understanding. Community health workers

- Have their own desks and office space;
- Plan to be in telephone contact every day;
- Participate in weekly staff meetings;
- Visit or participate in other staff members’ activities (and other staff members visit or participate in community health workers’ activities); and
- Work with providers when caring for a client.

Being a “Buffer.” At times, the manager may need to be a “buffer” between community health workers and other program staff members. A buffer is the person who hears the concerns from other staff members and filters the communication so the worker can understand yet not be adversely affected by it.

Being Culturally Sensitive. Knowing all the unique cultural norms of any ethnic group is impossible. Being culturally sensitive means listening for and observing the “unspoken” in all communications and following up to understand each word spoken or gesture made.

Professionals often are goal-oriented and in a hurry. They may not take the time to listen to the concerns of community health workers. Community health workers may place a higher value on the relationship they have with a person than on the tasks that need to be done.

Listening. Being able to elicit and listen to the concerns of community health workers is the “art” of managing them. Repeating the exact words that are spoken often elicits further communication because workers feel they have been heard.

Recordkeeping

The roles and responsibilities of the manager of community health workers include developing and maintaining simple and accurate recordkeeping procedures. Recordkeeping forms should be changed as needed as community health workers take on more responsibilities. Revised forms need to capture the actual activities performed.

A common complaint of community health workers is that they are asked to do too much paperwork. Several strategies can address this often legitimate concern.

- Consolidate the information from several forms into one.
- Have community health workers work in pairs or groups, and help each other to complete the forms and review each other’s forms.
- Be persistent and constantly check the forms for accuracy, providing timely feedback; be in continuous communication by phone or in person encouraging workers to complete their forms.
- Remind workers of their importance and value and that accurate recordkeeping is needed to evaluate the program.

Quality Assurance

The roles and responsibilities of the manager of community health workers include maintaining quality throughout the program.

Routine Practices. Initially, daily observation, supervision, and on-the-job training is necessary. Weekly staff meetings involve community health workers in the planning and evaluation of outreach activities. Directly observing and spending time with community health workers while they are interacting with their clients is a valuable way to ensure that they are conveying the right information. Time spent together also shows that the manager is interested and supportive.

Patient Confidentiality. Managers must communicate clearly and provide constant reminders that all contact with women is strictly confidential and that repeating any personal information to other workers or community members is grounds for immediate firing.

Encourage community health workers to talk with their supervisors about sensitive issues or situations that are emotionally draining. Tell them to ask for help in coping with hard situations.

Skills Development

The roles and responsibilities of the manager of community health workers include providing initial orientation, training, continuing education, and mentoring as appropriate. The manager must be absolutely certain that community health workers know their roles and responsibilities. A job description with roles and responsibilities is essential. The manager must quickly respond to emerging issues with problemsolving sessions or continuing education.

Mentoring offers specific, one-on-one learning from a trusted, experienced, respected colleague or superior who is insightful about the organization. It encourages learning on-the-job lessons at the precise time needed. The key to mentoring is a relationship built on trust and two-way communication.

Benefits of Mentoring. Mentoring experienced community health workers to become leaders and role models for newer community health workers is desirable and very empowering for new workers. Mentoring and empowering community health workers contribute to their personal growth and development. This in turn can increase their employment opportunities, self-esteem, and status within their communities. Mentoring helps keep the program on track.

Mentoring opportunities arise when the manager observes how the protégé typically handles a certain situation, such as speaking to a group of women in church. The mentor should ask the community health worker what she would like to be able to do differently. Then the mentor can observe the protégé making changes in future situations and encourage her.

Ongoing Continuing Education. Continuing education increases community health workers' skills and confidence in their ability to learn new information and help people change health-related behaviors.

Recognition and Incentives

The roles and responsibilities of the manager of community health workers include providing recognition and incentives that are meaningful to workers (e.g., opportunities for professional development, certificates, flexible schedules, t-shirts, mugs).

A variety of opportunities are available to recognize and acknowledge community health workers for their contributions. These include individual recognition, recognition by the agency, recognition in the community, and recognition by family members. Provide opportunities for family members, especially spouses, to understand and appreciate the contributions that community health workers are making in their communities.



Using the Action Steps Template

Take a few minutes to think about how using the suggestions about management and maintenance might enhance your community health worker program. List two action steps related to management and maintenance of community health workers that you will take on the Action Steps Template on page 33.