



Training Opportunities and Credentialing for Community Health Workers

Expansion of SkillWorks: Partners for a productive workforce

SUMMARY

In 2005, *SkillWorks*, a Boston-based collaborative, launched the Community Health Worker Initiative of Boston, a workforce partnership to increase career advancement and training opportunities for traditionally low-paid community health workers.

The initiative provided counseling and training to community health workers and others who wanted training or advancement in this field. *SkillWorks* also worked with employers and educational institutions to improve job status and training opportunities.

The evaluators of the initiative were:

- Mt. Auburn Associates, of Cambridge, Mass.
- Abt Associates, of Boston

Key Results

- The initiative served 219 current and prospective community health workers.
- A new industry-recognized credential was developed.
- Two community colleges started certificate and degree programs for community health workers.
- The initiative served some 219 participants, of whom 93 received a credential.
- Several employers offered new benefits to community health workers.

Evaluation Findings

- The cost of the project exceeded the value of increased wages and other benefits to project participants within the three-year grant implementation period.
- Changes in the employment conditions of community health workers away from salaries paid for by grants to a more robust career path would be necessary to have a

significant impact on the field as well as to see a positive return on investment over the long term.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) supported this project from September 2005 through December 2010 with a grant of \$1,674,305.

CONTEXT

The quality of health and health care services begins with frontline workers, including community health workers, who often are the first and most frequent contacts for patients and clients. "Community health worker" includes a range of job titles at community health centers, public health agencies and other local organizations. These frontline workers apply an understanding of their agency's target population—their language, culture and experiences—to:

- Advocate for their clients
- Provide health education and outreach
- Help clients navigate the health care system

Despite their importance, these essential workers are often poorly paid and have limited opportunities for training, advancement and rewards. A study released by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health in 2005 reported that community health workers in the state suffered:

- High turnover
- Low wages
- Lack of a formal career ladder
- Job insecurity resulting from unpredictable funding

The statewide mean salary was \$23,000, or \$6,000 less than the state average for the general population, with no increase based on educational level. Community health workers with a college degree made about \$13,000 less than those with degrees working in comparable positions in other professions.

The study described the community health workers as eager for additional training and said that managers who had been community health workers tended to provide higher-quality supervision.

About SkillWorks

SkillWorks, launched in 2003, describes itself as "a multiyear initiative to improve workforce development in Boston and in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts." A collaborative that includes philanthropic, government, community organization, union and employer representatives, it seeks to help low-income individuals attain jobs with wages sufficient to support a family and to help businesses find skilled workers. This support has focused on health care areas such as emergency medical care as well as in non-health fields such as the hospitality and automotive industries.

A key component of the SkillWorks approach is the Workforce Partnership, a large-scale, multiyear project aimed at linking providers of education and training to employers in the field that offer career-oriented jobs and advancement opportunities. Other components are:

- Ongoing technical assistance and capacity-building services for the partnerships
- Public policy advocacy aimed at achieving broad improvements in the workforce development system that will strengthen workers' opportunities

RWJF's Interest in This Area

In December 2004, RWJF funded five diverse projects to better understand the issues that impact the frontline workforce. See the [Program Results](#) on grant ID# 051341 for information on the findings.

In the fall of 2005, RWJF sponsored a series of one-day informational workshops, *Frontline Workforce Development: Promoting Partnerships and Emerging Practices in Health and Health Care* to share new research and innovative practices for advancement of the frontline workforce in health and health care. The final workshop report, *Defining the Frontline Workforce*, and other resources are available [online](#).

From 2006 to 2009, staff members of the Georgetown University Law Center in Washington worked to raise the profile of community health workers in the health care system and among policy-makers. See the [Program Results](#) on Grant ID# 055510.

In November 2006, Health Workforce Solutions produced a 239-page chartbook, *Workers Who Care: A Graphical Profile of the Frontline Health and Health Care Workforce*. It then published it as a CD. For more information, see the [Program Results](#) on ID# 052218.

From 2006 to 2009, the San Francisco Foundation culled cross-site lessons from two workforce development initiatives, SkillWorks and the Bay Area Workforce Funding Collaborative. See the [Program Results](#) on Grant ID# 056836.

In March 2006, RWJF launched the national program *Jobs to Careers: Promoting Work-Based Learning for Quality Care* and issued a call for proposals. The \$15.8 million national initiative, a collaboration with the Hitachi Foundation and the U.S. Department of Labor, awarded three-year grants to 17 local partnerships.

RWJF and the Hitachi Foundation received the [2010 Critical Impact Award](#) from the Council on Foundations for the national initiative.

THE PROJECT

In 2005, SkillWorks launched the Community Health Worker Initiative of Boston, a workforce partnership to increase career advancement and training opportunities for traditionally low-paid community health workers. It assembled a consortium of employers, workers, training providers and other stakeholders to serve as partners for the initiative. See the [Appendix](#) for a list of these partners.

An initiative partner, [Jobs for the Future](#), a national nonprofit research and advocacy organization based in Boston, examined the job status of community health workers and produced a report, *Community Health Worker Advancement: A Research Summary*. See the [Bibliography](#) for details.

SkillWorks awarded planning and implementation grants to [Action for Boston Community Development \(ABCD\)](#), a local antipoverty organization, to provide training, coaching and career assistance to community health workers employed by public and nonprofit health clinics and other agencies. ABCD employed career and academic counselors to provide one-on-one support to participating workers.

Another initiative partner, the Community Health Education Center (CHEC), provided training. CHEC, which already ran a training program, the Comprehensive Outreach Education Certificate, for community health workers, added a second, advanced certificate with feedback from employer partners that helped identify skills that community health workers would need in order to advance.

While the existing workforce was the initial target, the initiative received a federal grant under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (see [Other Funding](#)) to provide pre-employment services to people seeking to become community health workers. Participants completed the two CHEC certificates and worked 16-week paid internships in the field.

SkillWorks also worked with educational institutions to develop degree and certification programs, and with employers to improve the pay and status of workers and enhance career opportunities.

Evaluation

SkillWorks contracted with two firms to evaluate the project:

- Mt., Auburn Associates, of Cambridge, Mass., conducted periodic project evaluations and produced a report, *Community Health Worker Initiative of Boston (2010)*, (downloadable from [this page](#)).
- Abt Associates, of Boston, conducted a Return on Investment (ROI) analysis of the project and reported its findings in *Return on Investment Study: Community Health Worker Initiative of Boston*.

See the [Bibliography](#) for details.

Other Funding

The Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust and the Boston Foundation each contributed \$145,000 to the initiative. ABCD contributed \$17,336 in matching funds from a federal Community Services Block Grant. The initiative also received \$428,996 in federal stimulus funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for the "pre-employment" component for new community health workers.

RESULTS

SkillWorks reported the following results to RWJF:

- **The initiative served 164 community health workers currently employed by agencies and clinics in Boston, as well as 55 people seeking to become community health workers.**
 - Some 32 of the incumbent community health workers experienced wage gains during the project. The evaluators estimated that the increases for 17 of these workers were likely attributable to the initiative's efforts.
 - Some 37 of the 55 pre-employment trainees were placed in jobs by the end of 2010, 20 as community health workers. Another 21 were still receiving training.
- **The Community Health Education Center developed a new credential for community health workers, the Advanced Community Outreach Educator Curriculum.** Some 93 program participants (either incumbent community health workers or trainees) earned either the basic or advanced credential, or both.
- **Two community colleges—Bunker Hill Community College and MassBay Community College—started certificate and degree programs for community health workers.**
- **Several employers offered new benefits or training opportunities to community health workers:**

- Two instituted career ladders.
- Two instituted a release time policy for community health workers to participate in training and coaching.
- One started offering a tuition reimbursement benefit.

In addition to specific results, the project director, Loh-Sze Leung, stated: "We made tremendous progress in educating policy-makers and grantmakers. The grant increased the visibility of the [community health worker] field and its importance in our health care system as well as the commitment to workforce training for this occupation."

EVALUATION FINDINGS

The evaluators reported the following findings:

- **The SkillWorks Community Health Worker Initiative had a negative return on investment.** The cost of the project exceeded the value of increased wages and other benefits to project participants within the term of project implementation.
- **Changes in the employment conditions of community health workers would be necessary to have a significant impact on the field.** Shifting the funding of worker salaries away from grants—the usual source of salaries for community health workers—and establishing more robust career pathways could facilitate workers' advancement as well as positively impact future return on investment from this project.

"Three years is just a drop in the bucket for advocacy strategies and systems change, and particularly when systems change was going to have the largest potential impact on return on investment," noted Leung. "I think this was reflected in the result we saw in the [evaluation] study."

LESSONS LEARNED

Time constraints, a soft economy and the structure of the target workforce made the project's goals difficult to achieve. For example, community health workers are generally paid with soft grant money rather than through reimbursements from insurance companies, making it difficult to create the financial underpinnings for career advancement.

1. **Make sure that participants in a career advancement program understand the financial return they will receive for the investment of their time.** The workers questioned the program's financial benefits due to wage constraints imposed by grant funding and limited career ladders at their workplace. (Evaluator)

2. **Carefully consider the structure and requirements of employer partnership agreements.** Requiring employers to pay a bonus to participants for earning a credential serves as a disincentive to join the program. By limiting assistance to participants seeking to advance with their current employer, the partnership agreement also may have worked against the interests of those workers who might have benefited from switching employers. (Evaluator)
3. **Be strategic in determining the geographic scope of a collaborative.** In this project, the policy-change goals required statewide action, but participant training and coaching sessions were offered only in Boston. This made it difficult to recruit employers elsewhere in Massachusetts who might have adopted the innovative practices sought by the initiative. (Evaluator)
4. **Recognize that system change often takes longer than anticipated.** Stakeholders recognized that system change would be needed to support worker career advancement but underestimated how long it would take to achieve those changes. Without reforms in the funding structures for the workers, employers had limited options for helping participants achieve their advancement goals. (Evaluator)

AFTERWARD

In September 2010, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts created a board of certification for community health workers effective in 2012. The legislation creating the board passed in large part due to advocacy efforts of the SkillWorks Community Health Worker Initiative and other funders. The board is charged with creating and administering a certification process for community health workers and setting standards for their training.

ABCD continued pre-employment training with the remaining federal funds as well as coaching and training, on a more limited scale, of already employed workers.

Project Director Leung cautioned: "There's not too much interest from the funding community to continue to support incumbent training activities without more movement in changing financing and health care payments to make support of community health workers more sustainable. Fortunately, efforts to continue to push these types of changes are continuing beyond this specific project."

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APPENDIX

Initiative Partners

A list with Web addresses is available [online](#).

Employer Representatives

DotWell
Dorchester House Multi-Service Center
Codman Square Health Center
Whittier Street Health Center
East Boston Neighborhood Health Center
PACT Project at Partners in Health/Brigham and Women's Hospital
Refugee and Immigrant Health Program
Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Latino American Health Institute
Boston Housing Authority
Boston Private Industry Council
Morgan Memorial Goodwill Industries
Boston Career Link
JobNet
ABCD Health Services
World Education, Inc.

Education and Training Representatives

Bunker Hill Community College
MassBay Community College

Urban College of Boston
UMass Boston, College of Public and
Community Service
Medical Foundation
Creative Workplace Learning
JFY NetWorks
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
Training and Upgrading Fund
Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology

Systems Change Advocacy Representatives

Massachusetts Association of Community
Health Workers
Massachusetts Public Health Association
Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Massachusetts League of Community Health
Centers
Center for Community Health Education,
Research and Service, Inc.
Local 1199 SEIU

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Communications or Promotions

Grantee Web sites

www.chwinitiative.org. Community Health Worker Initiative of Boston Web site. Boston, SkillWorks.