



Community Health Workers

CAREER PATHWAYS

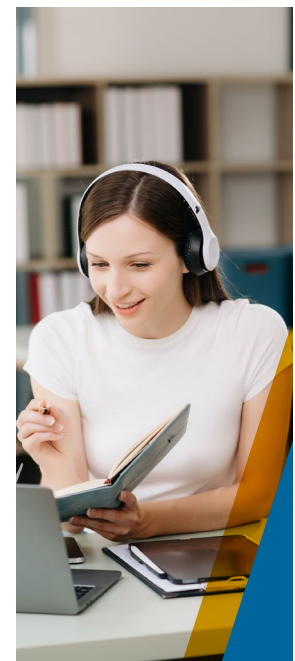
I. Introduction to CHW Career Pathways

Community Health Workers (CHWs) play an essential role in bridging healthcare services and the communities they serve. This technical assistance resource aims to outline the career pathways available to CHWs, demonstrating two main avenues for career progression: advancing within the CHW profession, and transitioning into other healthcare-related careers. Establishing and nurturing these pathways requires collaboration between various partners, including healthcare employers, educational institutions, workforce development boards, and community organizations.

II. Advantages of Building Career Pathways for Community Health Workers

The 2012 combined letter from the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Labor indicates the widely accepted definition of career pathways as “a series of connected education and training strategies and support services that enable individuals to secure industry relevant certification and obtain employment within an occupational area and to advance to higher levels of future education and employment in that area.”¹

- Initially, CHW certification may be more accessible to individuals than other healthcare careers requiring longer training timelines and larger cost commitments. Career pathway options for CHWs can encourage individuals to begin their healthcare career with aspirations of advancing in the future.
- A CHW certification allows individuals to serve their communities in a variety of capacities, learning about different careers in healthcare through their work. As CHWs experience more options for healthcare careers, defined career pathways provide guidance on how to take the next steps toward their career goals.
- As CHWs advance in their skills and begin to mentor new CHWs, an experienced CHW can advance into specialized care areas or CHW leadership roles. A career pathway model demonstrates these options and the necessary steps to advance into a specialty or leadership role.



¹ <https://careerpathways.workforcegps.org/resources/2014/06/09/20/55/eta-ovae-and-acf-issue-joint-letter-of-support-for-career-pathways>

III. Advancing within the CHW Profession

CHWs can progress within their field by gaining additional certifications, education, and experience, leading to roles such as Senior CHWs and Supervisory CHWs. This progression is supported by structured career pathways that highlight the necessary skills and competencies required for each level. For instance, experienced CHWs can advance to leadership roles where they mentor new CHWs, manage community health programs, and influence healthcare policies. Key partners in this pathway include community colleges offering CHW certification programs, healthcare employers providing on-the-job training, and professional associations offering advanced certifications.



COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER

ENTRY LEVEL

- **Description:** Liaises between healthcare providers and the community to facilitate access to services, improve the quality and cultural competence of service delivery, and promote health education and prevention.
- **Roles:** CHW, Promotores, Community Health Representative
- **Responsibilities:** Outreach and education, support and advocacy, care coordination, records maintenance

COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

FOUNDATIONAL LEVEL

- **Description:** Engages with the community to provide support, raise awareness about health issues, and connect individuals to resources and services. No formal training.
- **Roles:** Community Volunteer, Community Liaison, Community Advocate
- **Responsibilities:** Outreach and education, support and advocacy, resource referral, event participation

SENIOR CHW

MID-LEVEL

- **Description:** Takes on leadership roles and provides mentorship to less experienced CHWs. Might also specialize in one of the areas below.
- **Roles:** Health Advocate, Care Coordinators, Health Educators, Certified Nursing Assistants
- **Responsibilities:** Mentorship, advanced health education, program coordination, data collection and reporting
- **Specialties:** Oral care, diabetes education, mental health, elderly care, pregnancy care, post-hospital care, substance abuse, K-12 education

SUPERVISORY CHW

SENIOR LEVEL

- **Description:** Oversees a team of CHWs, ensuring that they provide high-quality services and meet program goals. Combines administrative, supervisory, and direct-service responsibilities.
- **Roles:** CHW Supervisors, Social Workers, Case Managers
- **Responsibilities:** Team supervision, program management, quality assurance, stakeholder engagement

IV. Transitioning to Other Healthcare-Related Careers

Alternatively, CHWs can leverage their experience and skills to transition into other healthcare roles, such as nursing, social work, or health education. Career pathways for these transitions typically involve further education and specialized training, facilitated by partnerships with educational institutions, healthcare organizations, and workforce development agencies. For example, CHWs might pursue degrees in public health or nursing, supported by scholarships, apprenticeships, or flexible work-study arrangements provided by their employers or educational partners.

These career pathways not only enhance the professional development of CHWs but also contribute to building a robust and versatile healthcare workforce capable of meeting diverse community health needs.

V. Career Pathways in CHW Specialty Areas

As career pathways are being developed, it is important to recognize the need for specialty education and field experiences in some of the more in-demand areas. These specialty areas can also lead to other pathway opportunities in government agencies, educational institutions or non-profit organizations. Some of the specialty areas may include:

- Health Education
- Chronic Condition Prevention and Care
- Diabetes Education
- CHW Leadership Roles
- Post Hospital Care
- Oral Care
- Pregnancy Care
- Mental Health
- Substance Abuse
- Elderly Care
- School Districts

VI. Possible CHW Healthcare Career Pathways

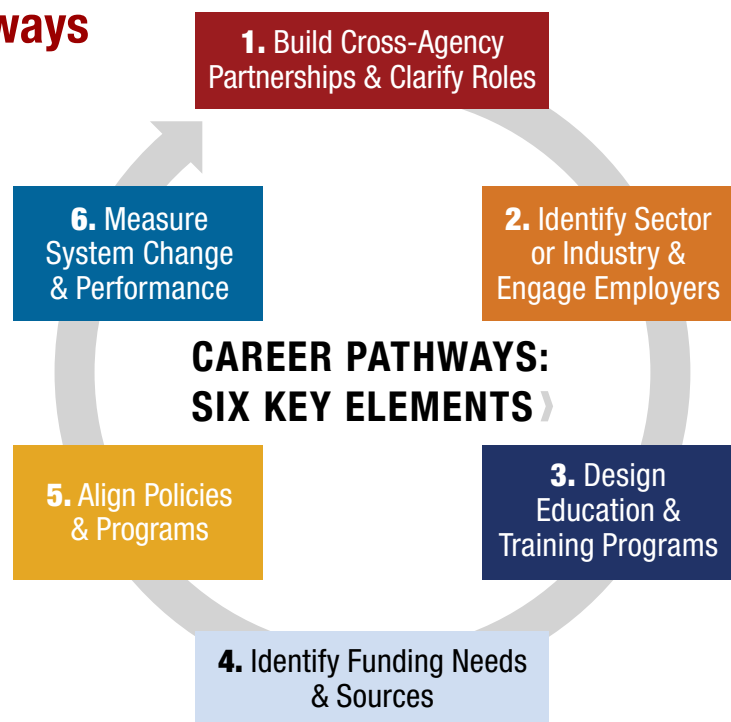
A variety of healthcare careers can be considered for inclusion in CHW pathways. Your CHW pathway should focus on occupations with a high demand for workers in your area. Refer to O*Net for employment projects in specific occupations.

- Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) or Registered Nurse (RN)
- Emergency Medical Technician (EMT)
- Social Worker
- Occupational Health and Safety Specialist
- Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)
- Counselor
- Pharmacy Technician
- Peer Recovery Specialist

More information on this topic can be found in the [Career Pathways Catalog of Toolkits](#)

VII. Building CHW Career Pathways

The Career Pathways Toolkit from the Department of Labor provides six elements to developing career pathways systems, as displayed in the included graphic. Below is a brief description of each element and how it may apply to developing a CHW pathway. Please refer to the full toolkit for more detailed information regarding each element.² As the career pathways image indicates, there are six recommended elements to career pathway implementation. Use these elements to begin planning your systematic career pathway:



² https://careerpathways.workforcegps.org/resources/2016/10/20/10/11/Enhanced_Career_Pathways_Toolkit

1

Steps 1 & 2

Build cross-agency partnerships and clarify roles; Identify sector or industry and engage employers

2

Compile a list of current and potential partners who may invest time to develop systematic career pathways for future and current CHWs. Your program, postsecondary partners, K-12 partners, business partners, community-based organizations, local workforce development boards, economic development entities, and others in your community with an interest in developing the local workforce are all good options as you plan to develop career pathways. You may also discover a career pathway exists and is operating in your local area; if so, tap into the existing resource and determine how your program can get involved.

3

Steps 3 & 4

Design education and training programs; Identify funding needs and sources

4

With your training and/or apprenticeship programs already established, the career pathway partnership team you develop can work toward establishing funding sources to ensure accessibility and equity for participants entering the career pathway.

5

Steps 5 & 6

Align policies and programs; Measure system change and performance

6

Work with your partners to determine consistent policies for all aspects of your pathway program, from recruitment and enrollment through program completion and employment/further education. To measure system-change and performance, determine data collection points and methodology to understand the impact of career pathway implementation. Additionally, collection of quality data ensures necessary information is available for potential funding source opportunities.

VIII. How Employers Can Support Career Pathways

Career paths for CHWs can be dependent on opportunities available at their place of employment. Large healthcare facilities may have more opportunities for career advancement than smaller community-based organizations. Other factors to consider include job titles vs. job responsibilities for individuals doing the work of CHWs. In forming steps on career pathways, it is important to note that titles in the field are not standardized.³ Organizations may need to determine individual's current levels by skills and competencies rather than job titles.



According to the National Association of Community Health Workers, CHWs “express challenges of employment and career advancement that include funding, certification, and higher education requirements.”⁴ For employers to retain talent and provide opportunities for growth, a well thought-out and detailed career pathway strategy is essential.

Employers typically consider the following key factors when developing career pathways for their employees:

- **Skill Development and Training:** Employers look to create pathways that provide opportunities for continuous learning and skill development for CHWs. This might include on-the-job training, workshops, certifications, or formal education programs.
- **Increased Employee Productivity and Retention:** Employers want to match talents to the right jobs and responsibilities for CHWs (like some mentioned above) and provide opportunities for career development and upskilling. This demonstrates commitment to employee growth.
- **Career Advancement:** Employers want pathways that offer clear opportunities for advancement for CHWs. This could involve promotions, moving into higher-level roles, or transitioning into different departments or specialties within the company.
- **Job Stability and Security:** Employers value pathways that offer stability and security for CHWs.

³ <https://cachw.org/job-titles>

⁴ https://nachw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CHW_career.pdf

- **Work-Life Balance:** Increasingly, employers are considering work-life balance and may offer pathways that allow for flexibility in work hours, remote work options, or other benefits for newly hired CHWs.
- **Compensation and Benefits:** Competitive salary and benefits packages are crucial in attracting and retaining talented CHWs and other employees.
- **Company Culture and Values:** Pathways that align with the company's culture and values are important. Employers seek potential CHWs who fit well into the organizational culture and can contribute positively to the workplace environment.
- **Leadership and Mentorship Opportunities:** Employers often look for pathways that provide opportunities for leadership development and mentorship. This could involve formal mentorship programs (including apprenticeship) for CHWs, leadership training, or exposure to senior leadership roles.
- **Innovation and Adaptability:** In today's rapidly changing world, employers value pathways that encourage innovation, creativity, and adaptability. They may seek CHWs who can contribute new ideas and adapt to evolving industry trends and technologies.
- **Networking and Collaboration:** Pathways that foster networking and collaboration both within and outside the organization are highly valued. Employers recognize the importance of building professional relationships and partnerships for CHWs that can benefit the company.
- **Ethics and Integrity:** Finally, employers seek CHWs who demonstrate honesty, transparency, and a commitment to ethical behavior in their career progression.

By considering these factors, a career pathway development team, with employer feedback and suggestions, can design and promote career pathways that attract and retain top talent, while also ensuring that CHWs have opportunities to grow and succeed within the organization.

IX. Conclusion

Establishing career pathways for your CHW program and/or encouraging partner organizations to invest in developing career pathways for CHWs signals to individual CHWs that it is possible to work toward career goals in leadership or other healthcare opportunities while serving their communities.