

# Community Health Workers Role in Public Health Programming

Podcast Transcript

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**0:00:10.8 Storee Harris-Stubblefield:** Welcome to Prepared. Set. Go! A podcast of Public Health Prepared. Public Health Prepared is the workforce development branch of the Michigan Center for Infectious Disease Threats and Pandemic Preparedness, or MCIDT Initiative, which is housed at and funded by the University of Michigan. We hope this podcast will better equip the public health workforce to handle ongoing and future health crises. Thank you for tuning into our episode. Today we'll be talking about the role of community health workers or CHWs, and the role they play in public health in emergency preparedness response. I'm your host Storee Harris-Stubblefield. Today we have Shannon Lijewski joining us. Shannon has over 20 years of experience as a community health worker. She has worked in the field, designed, implemented and evaluated programs, design curriculum and has been a leading stakeholder in policy and financial stability of CHWs across the country. She is the principal at Everyday Life Consulting, founder of the National Rural CHW Network, Policy Co-chair for the National Association of CHW and author of the "I Am A CHW" campaign. Welcome to the podcast, and I'm excited to speak with you today, Shannon.

**0:01:25.2 Shannon Lijewski:** Thank you Storee for having me.

**0:01:26.8 SH:** Thank you. So, before we start discussing our topic, Shannon, please tell our audience about the work that you do.

**0:01:34.3 SL:** I wear many hats in my day-to-Day work at Everyday Life. Today I'm gonna focus on my role as a community health worker. As a community health worker, my role is centered on forging strong connections between communities, healthcare providers, and those that we serve. I actively engage with individuals addressing those health disparities, promoting preventative measures and providing culturally sensitive health education. Through that role, I contribute to also building that community resiliency and ensuring that public health initiatives are accessible, easy to understand are embraced at the local level.

**0:02:14.1 SH:** Thank you, Shannon. So can you tell us more about what are community health workers and what do they do?

**0:02:17.7 SL:** Community health workers are defined as frontline public health workers who have trusted relationships with the community, often an unusually close understanding through lived experience. It's our neighbors. It's each and every one of us to some extent, depending on the community that we live in. Our lived experience and our cultural tied to that area that we live, work, and play is what makes that community health worker so impactful.

**0:02:44.9 SH:** Thank you for that insight. So, I think that CHWs play a vital role in public health, and I also think it's been increasingly clear with the COVID-19 pandemic and natural

disaster response throughout the state. Can you talk more about the role of CHWs in the Midland Michigan flooding emergency that occurred in March, 2020?

**0:03:05.8 SL:** Being a resident of Midland County knowing that we had historical flooding every single year. This was a very unique year, as you can imagine, as our team was already responding to COVID and helping to be extra capacity builders. So our work at Everyday Life Consulting isn't just community health workers, but each and every one of us are community health workers, and so we all had to kind of activate to help our community throughout that time. So just on the heels of the pandemic really setting in, we had our epic floods, so something that we had prepared for, for decades in our community. We had our dam break on multiple rivers which devastated our communities. Took out a lot of housing. Thankfully there were no tragedies, but really for our rural communities in particular, who I tend to serve, it made it even more disconnected taking out one of our major highways and some of our other roadways to get into the community to get resources that you would typically get when you're affected by a flood.

**0:04:13.1 SH:** So, with that in mind, how might local health departments be able to use CHWs in emergency response situations, whether similar to this flooding or something else?

**0:04:25.3 SL:** This one I think is one of our greatest opportunities. Our local health departments are often equipped with emergency preparedness coordinators and others health nurses that are used to going out and responding and providing critical resources. Community health workers, again, being that competent liaison, being able to speak the language, be trusted, be able to, I would say, educate and inform in a way that makes sense and is approachable. That's where your CHWs can act as that on the ground connector. Leveraging those close ties to the communities, disseminating timely and accurate information to address concerns and helping to really, I would say, move things forward and enhancing that engagement. In our cases, when it came to the flood, we had seconds to prepare. So it was people going door to door and helping to evacuate. And then after the flooding event happened making sure that individuals were helping with the water. So if we were affected and had water, that we got things removed so that there wasn't mold that grew. And then access to food and clean water to shower and to cook.

**0:05:41.7 SH:** Thank you for that, Shannon. It is great to hear about all the ways that CHWs have helped in that situation. So the flooding in Midland occurred in March, 2020, and this was the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Can you talk a little bit more about how CHWs were used specifically during the pandemic?

**0:06:00.7 SL:** Yeah. Many ways for our team as we had stated meeting communities where they're at is really our motto, and this has meant everything. We were, again, the only community outreach hub at that time in Midland County helping to go door to door. So we

were providing masks and cleaning supplies to help individuals who weren't able to go to the store to get groceries. When there were cases, we were... And individual families were isolated, we were doing door drops to make sure that there was food in the house and any other needs that were being met. Our team as community health workers never stopped working. We were in the community the whole time and helping be part of that extended infrastructure and take the burden off of our medical system. So the other part too that we did was helping to add capacity to 211 call, helping to be emergency operators and responding also by the phone.

**0:07:00.8 SH:** Okay. So I wanna shift gears just a little bit, but related, Lyme disease is an emerging infectious disease in Michigan. In what ways have CHWs assisted with the public health response?

**0:07:08.1 SL:** Thank you for bringing this one up Storee as it personally relates to me, and I know I'd shared my story with your team that Lyme's disease is an emerging issue. We have a lot of emerging public health issues within our state and our community health workers, again, being that they are so closely tied at the local level can play such a vital role in responding. Can again, help with that burden piece of stress for the individuals that they're working with, help to get information to communities, help to teach on strategies. When we think of Lyme's disease, it's early identification that's key. And so knowing where would be your risk to get a tick, and what would you do if you were bit by a tick? Preventative measures such as pulling up your socks and tucking them into your pants and putting on some bug spray that contain DEET are all measures that can be helpful. Checking your dogs, they're one of the biggest carriers to bring the vector into your home too.

**0:08:07.2 SH:** Thank you for that insight. So how could CHWs be involved in education, prevention, response efforts related to Lyme disease?

**0:08:20.9 SL:** I would say many different ways. I think they can play a vital role in disseminating information, but also they could conduct community workshops. They could work alongside the medical team, such as the nurses and healthcare providers to inform, again, educate, kind of sharing best practices. Some of those measures that I had shared as far as best practices when you're out in the woods, and knowing that we are a very rural state. And so it's not uncommon for members of the community to be walking in the woods or tall grass. Additionally collaborating to, I think things like this, right? Like podcasts and awareness campaigns.

**0:09:01.3 SH:** Thank you for those ideas. And I agree awareness campaigns are really important. So can you please tell our audience how they can continue to build CHW capacity and the importance of doing so? I think you've illustrated that with the flooding and Lyme disease, but what more can the individual do?

**0:09:15.5 SL:** It's a continued investment. CHW capacity building, there's education, there's mentorship, there's training. Collaboration is really critical. So if you don't employ a community health worker at your local nonprofit or school system or health department, partner with someone who does. They're always... That co-location can be really helpful. And it also helps to build that trusting relationship with your community members and basically ultimately strengthen that public health system.

**0:09:47.3 SH:** Okay. So, kind of speaking to the importance of CHWs, Medicaid has expanded to cover CHW services thanks to a policy passed in December, 2023. What do you think about this?

**0:10:01.9 SL:** Super excited. Everyone who knows me knows I'm the biggest fan. I've been part of this work as a stakeholder for the last decade. I've been on four different advisory committees. I'm newly elected to our state CHW advisory committee as well. And it's something we've worked really hard for, and it's gonna help with our sustainability, our visibility of the work that we do as well knowing that we're an integral part of that community and clinical care team and more to come. Right? So this is new. Many states do not have this, and so we are building it and designing it and gonna champion it for... It's a big win for Michigan.

**0:10:40.0 SH:** Okay. So would Michigan be one of the first states to pilot something like this?

**0:10:43.7 SL:** We are. We're not the very first but the very first in a long time to be doing it in the way that we are doing it.

**0:10:53.8 SH:** Okay. Always excited to see Michigan on the cutting edge of innovation when it comes to public health. So definitely looking to see that collaboration going forward.

**0:11:02.8 SL:** Well, in addition to the Medicaid, we are also being recognized, so our workforce is also gonna become certified in Michigan for the first time.

**0:11:10.6 SH:** Oh, wow, okay.

**0:11:11.9 SL:** That's a big pillar of recognition for the work that we do.

**0:11:13.7 SH:** Okay, great. Definitely looking forward to knowing more and seeing that rollout in the coming months. So lastly can you tell our audience how to become or connect with CHWs? How can they connect with you and the work?

**0:11:28.8 SL:** We are... First and foremost, CHWs are born, not made. That is a quote that I've used regularly from my colleague Andrea Krotzer-Burton. It's really within us, right? It's a passion, it's a desire to help. Becoming certified or taking training is a really easy next step. So we at Everyday Life Consulting offer both our nationally aligned curriculum and the MiCHWA Community Health worker curriculum. And so you can visit our website [everydaylifechw.com](http://everydaylifechw.com), or you can email or connect with me online. The other part too is mentorship, right? So there's some apprenticeship programs that are starting up. Get connected with an organization that you care about and wanna make a difference. Often these things are employer sponsored. The other thing right now is a great time to get trained because Michigan Reconnect, which was a scholarship program historically for associate's degrees in December, opened up to certificate based programs. And our partnership with Mid Michigan College is one of those. And so it's a great time to get training and get it paid for.

**0:12:36.9 SH:** Oh, I'm very happy to hear all these opportunities to do so. And one question kind of related to that, for those thinking about what type of fields and organizations do CHWs work for, I know we mentioned the collaboration with public health, but do you typically find them in local health departments or healthcare agencies? Or where will you find CHWs?

**0:13:00.9 SL:** Our workforce is so amazing, Storee. We have over 150 titles and represent over a thousand cultures. So when you think about that just in Michigan, that is hundreds of organizations, anything from the local school to community-based nonprofit, housing organizations, the faith-based communities, many of which have employed or partnered with community health workers. I do think Michigan's unique in its approach for emphasizing the CHWs role within public health, I think is gonna be one of our strengths when you think about how Michigan is different. And a lot of that comes into just the importance and the investment into our public health infrastructure through the pandemic and into the future. Through our community health innovation regions and our state social determinants of health strategy, our CHWs are those extenders. They are the ones who are helping to identify the community-based needs and individual needs, and bring them back into that community response system.

**0:13:58.9 SH:** Shannon, thank you so much for sharing those resources on how to become a community health worker and who our audience can connect with. I do implore and encourage our audience to investigate and find out more about community health work if they are interested. So as we wrap up today what is one thing about your job that keeps you coming back day after day, whether or not it's related to today's topic?

**0:14:24.4 SL:** Oh, this is a tough one. I would say one thing that keeps me coming back in my role as a community health worker is just this profound sense of fulfillment that I get from helping to support my community members on their journey to health and wellbeing. Witnessing the positive impact of the engagement both at the individual level and also the

things that our great state has been doing, and being able to continually reinforce that commitment that if we're empowering others and we're addressing health challenges at the grassroots level, we really have future opportunities.

**0:14:57.2 SH:** Thank you. I'm also a CHW. I've renewed mine recently, so definitely happy to be back into seeing what CHWs are doing out here, and also working in public health and seeing that bridge being built. I'm very excited for the future as these two come together and work together.

**0:15:13.8 SL:** Yes, myself as well, right? This is one big happy family. And that's one thing that I think people... It's contagious. You know what I mean? When you're a community health worker and you're around your peers and the work that we do is so impactful.

**0:15:34.6 SH:** Yes. So I wanna thank you so much for joining us today to share your experience and provide some insight on this topic. To our listeners, we hope that you've learned more about community health workers and the role they play in public health emergency preparedness and response. We encourage you to check out the transcript and resources in the podcast notes. With that, we'll end here for today. Stay safe and stay prepared.

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