

Title: Teaming Mechanisms of Community Health Worker-Primary Care Integration to Enhance Health Equity

Abstract:

Background: Community Health Workers (CHWs) act as links between the community and healthcare. These roles are termed by the IOM as, “one of the most important strategies” to address rising medical costs, chronic conditions, and health disparities.

As primary care (PC) expands to address upstream social drivers of health, CHWs are becoming part of PC teams, requiring the merging of two health sectors: social services and clinical care. Yet the mechanisms of integration within the team are not well understood. Within PC this is a consequential gap, as better understanding of CHW-PC integration can support the growth of CHW roles, expanding their ability to support care teams and address critical patient needs.

It's imperative to learn from organizations that have effectively integrated CHWs in PC. Roots Community Health (Roots), a CHC serving historically marginalized communities, has successfully integrated a CHW role, Roots Health Navigators (RHNs), into PC.

Objective: Guided by a team science approach, this research sought to understand the mechanisms of CHW-PC integration and develop a model to expand integration efforts.

Methods: A mixed methods study was conducted in three phases: 1) survey, 2) semi-structured interviews, and 3) model development. The survey identified team dynamics such as communication, trust and shared understanding, and interviews explored how collaborative teaming mechanisms take shape.

Results: Survey (n=25) results highlighted highly rated team dynamics including Shared Understanding and Acting & Feeling Like a Team. Qualitative (n=10) findings described how integration occurred through complex interactions that were community-responsive and collectively reduced burnout amongst the team. Joint findings noted the importance of RHNs to continuity of care, building trust, and enhancing PC team effectiveness.

Conclusion: With a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of CHW-PC integration, findings informed the development of a model to support communities in replicating this integrated PC approach to enhance health equity.