

Background:

Health systems are recognizing the importance of identifying social determinants by implementing health-related social needs (HRSNs) screenings in clinical care. Our institution integrated Community Health Workers (CHWs) to provide support in addressing identified needs.

Objective:

This study aimed to identify barriers and facilitators to HRSNs referrals and the integration of CHWs within clinical teams.

Methods:

This qualitative study explored perspectives from CHWs, program staff, and providers. Semi-structured interview guides were based on the 2022 Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research. Interviews were conducted via Zoom (November 2023-February 2024), audio-recorded, and transcribed. Two analysts independently coded transcripts, reconciling discrepancies using rapid qualitative methodology. Themes were identified using matrix tools and analytic memoing.

Results:

CHWs believe that effective framing of the CHW role by providers during patient visits likely led to increased patient's acceptance of referrals. Providers believe CHW integration into the clinical space improves continuous provider education on CHW utilization. Program staff cited strong leadership, clear role delineation, and high levels of clinician interaction with CHWs leading to successful referral workflows.

Despite strong support for CHWs, providers experience time constraints during visits, likely leading to missed referrals and insufficient patient discussions about CHWs. Providers cited misunderstandings on CHW versus social worker referrals and poor clinical integration of CHWs. Providers admitted to missing team meetings regarding CHW communications. Program staff believe a power dynamic exists between CHWs and providers, likely leading to CHWs feeling unable to advocate for themselves when receiving inappropriate referrals. CHWs find that sites with high staff turnover are challenging to continually re-educate. CHWs experience limitations in timely patient follow-up after the referral resulting in delayed patient contact likely leading to patients declining assistance.

Conclusion:

Enhancing CHW integration into clinical teams is crucial for addressing HRSNs. This study provides insights for improving CHWs' role in assisting patients with HRSNs.