



The Role of a Community Health Worker in the Behavioral Health and Medications for Opioid Use Disorder Space

Presented By: Alisa Howard, BA, CCHW

**CEO of Minority Health Consultants
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Who We Are

MHC, a boutique Public Health, Social Impact
and Wellness consulting
firm.

Services: Consulting, Training, Health Prevention,
Policy and Workforce Development



Alisa Howard: The Accidental Public Health Advocate™



Alisa Howard is a Las Vegas native and Owner of Minority Health Consultants (MHC), a boutique public health, social impact and wellness firm focused on health disparities and connecting marginalized communities with vital resources, advocacy and prevention services. With over 12 years of experience, she serves on several local and national health boards, including the Nevada Certification Board and the National Association of Community Health Worker's Policy committee.

A passionate advocate for health education, access, and policy herself, Alisa also trains Community Health Workers for over eight years, and has hosted two public health radio shows focusing on addressing health disparities. Believing firmly that public health must be shaped by the people it serves, Alisa is driven by the principle that true progress begins by involving the “community” in every aspect of our work.

**Angel Lash, MS, LCPC, LCADC-S,
LCADC**

**Community Advocate, Mental Health
and Substance Abuse counselor, LIMA
Diversion Program Coordinator at 8th
Judicial District Court**



Angel Lash was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan and move to the west coast to play collegiate basketball while pursuing her college education. She earned her Master's Degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from the University of Nevada Las Vegas where. Additionally, becoming a Licensed Clinical Alcohol and Drug Supervisor and Counselor and a Licensed Professional Counselor. Angel has worked in the behavioral health field for close to 15 years, from the private sector, non-profit, and government agencies providing both direct services and indirect services assisting those adults and youth from addiction and mental health issues. She currently works at the 8th Judicial District Court as a program coordinator, coordinating the Law Enforcement Intervention for Mental Health and Addiction Program (LIMA) Diversion Program which is a partnership between 8th District Court and LVMPD. LIMA provides a voluntary pathway to recovery for individual suffering from substance use issues, mental health issues, and homelessness challenges to help these participants avoid entering the justice system. Over the past few years, Angel has received acknowledgements from the community partners such as in 2021 Angel was recognized by LVMPD Behavioral Health Unit for exceptional dedication to the success of the LIMA Program, 2021 received a Community Shining Star, 2022 won TINHIH's Boots on the Ground Award, and won 2023 Public Health Leadership Award. She is dedicated to working with some of the most vulnerable individuals in the Las Vegas community and plans to continue working to make a positive ripple effect in lives of others. Overall, Angel is a devoted wife, daughter, mother, business owner, and community advocate.

Scope of Presentation

- What is a Community Health Worker?
- The Role of CHWs in Behavioral Health and OUD Treatment
- Effective Strategies for CHWs in Supporting Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD)
- Case Studies and Success Stories
- The Future of Community Health Workers in Behavioral Health

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the presentation, participants will:

- Gain insight into the crucial role CHWs play in supporting individuals with OUD and in the broader behavioral health space.
- Learn specific interventions and strategies that CHWs can use to improve patient outcomes.
- Understand how to integrate CHWs into your existing programs to enhance care coordination and treatment success.



Introduction:

As the opioid crisis continues to impact communities across the country, there is a growing need to strengthen the network of support around individuals with opioid use disorder (OUD). One critical role in this support system is the Community Health Worker (CHW). CHWs bridge gaps between healthcare, social and human service systems and individuals in need, offering culturally appropriate education, resources, and advocacy.



What is a Community Health Worker (CHW)?

Definition: According to the American Public Health Association:

A Community Health Worker is a frontline public health worker who is a trusted member of and/or has a close understanding of the community served.

- This trusting relationship enables the worker to serve as a liaison/link/intermediary between health/social services and the community to facilitate access to services and improve the quality and cultural competence of service delivery.
- A community health worker also builds individual and community capacity by increasing health knowledge and self-sufficiency through a range of activities such as outreach, community education, informal counseling, social support and advocacy.

Source: APHA - <https://www.apha.org/apha-communities/member-sections/community-health-workers>

Short History of Community Health Workers Around the Globe

- CHWs were utilized in the late **1800s in Russia** in the public health epidemics like smallpox.
- In **China**, from the **1950s to 1970** there were more than one million CHW's as part of their broader social, political and healthcare reforms.
- **In 1973**, Promotores de Salud began in Mexico. They have had a significant impact on improving health outcomes, especially in rural and underserved areas.
- **Africa** began utilizing CHWs on a large scale in the **1960's** in rural areas to address a shortage of medical professionals.
- In **1968**, CHW's were established in the **U.S.** As of May 2023, The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BSL) estimates there are 63,400 CHWs throughout the United States.

Other Names for a Community Health Worker

- Case Manager
- Case Worker
- Community Health Advocate
- Community Health Outreach Worker
- Community Liaison
- Community Organizer
- Community Outreach Worker
- Enrollment Specialist
- Health Ambassador
- Health Educator
- Health Worker
- Patient Navigator
- Peer Counselor
- Peer Educator
- Promotoras
- Public Health Aid

Core Functions of a CHW

Direct Service Provision:

- Health education, screening, and assessments
- Medication adherence support
- Navigation of healthcare systems

Indirect Services:

- Community organizing and mobilization
- Peer support and mentorship
- Advocacy and policy work



RESOURCES

ADVOCACY



OUTREACH

EDUCATE



SUPPORT



Core CHW Roles

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 1. | Cultural Mediation Among Individuals, Communities, and Health and Social Service Systems |
| 2. | Providing Culturally Appropriate Health Education and Information |
| 3. | Care Coordination, Case Management, and System Navigation |
| 4. | Providing Coaching and Social Support |
| 5. | Advocating for Individuals and Communities |
| 6. | Building Individual and Community Capacity |
| 7. | Providing Direct Service |
| 8. | Implementing Individual and Community Assessments |
| 9. | Conducting Outreach |
| 10. | Participating in Evaluation and Research |

CHW
Competencies -
Core CHW Skills

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 1. | Communication Skills |
| 2. | Interpersonal and Relationship-Building Skills |
| 3. | Service Coordination and Navigation Skills |
| 4. | Capacity Building Skills |
| 5. | Advocacy Skills |
| 6. | Education and Facilitation Skills |
| 7. | Individual and Community Assessment Skills |
| 8. | Outreach Skills |
| 9. | Professional Skills and Conduct |
| 10. | Evaluation and Research Skills |
| 11. | Knowledge Base |

Questions and Comments



CHWs in Behavioral Health

Behavioral Health: Encompasses mental health and substance use disorders, including opioid use disorder (OUD).

Role of CHWs in Behavioral Health:

- Provide culturally competent support
- Build trust with individuals who may face stigma or distrust of healthcare systems
- Facilitate communication between patients and providers
- Support treatment adherence and recovery efforts



Providing culturally competent support and education

- Providing support and education.
- Assisting patients in navigating treatment
- Engaging with families and communities to reduce stigma and enhance support systems.
- Collaboration with healthcare providers in treatment planning and medication adherence.



SUPPORT



Engaging with families and communities to reduce stigma and enhance support systems

1. Culturally Tailored Education and Awareness

- CHWs provide information on mental health and substance use in ways that align with the cultural values and language of the communities they serve.
- They dispel myths and misconceptions about behavioral health through workshops, informal conversations, and printed/visual materials.

2. Trust-Building and Peer Support

- As community members themselves, CHWs often share lived experience or similar backgrounds, which makes them relatable and trustworthy.

3. Connecting Families to Resources

- They help with logistical barriers like transportation, insurance, and appointment scheduling—factors that often impede access.

4. Home Visits and Community Outreach

- By visiting homes or engaging in local events, CHWs provide behavioral health support in non-clinical, less stigmatizing settings.

Collaboration with healthcare providers in treatment planning and medication adherence

1. Communication Link Between Patient and Provider

- CHWs relay patient concerns, preferences, or barriers (e.g., side effects, other Social Determinants) that may affect treatment adherence.
- They help patients understand treatment plans and medications in plain language, including potential side effects or how to take medications correctly.

2. Participation in Care Team Meetings

- In integrated care models, CHWs attend case reviews or care planning meetings with nurses, physicians, social workers, and behavioral health specialists.
- They provide context on social determinants (e.g., food insecurity, employment, family dynamics) that clinicians may not capture in clinical encounters.

3. Promoting Medication Adherence

- CHWs help patients develop strategies for remembering to take medication—such as pill organizers, phone reminders, or daily routines.

4. Health Education and Coaching

- Through one-on-one coaching, CHWs explain the importance of treatment adherence and the consequences of missed medications or therapy appointments.

Questions and Comments



Understanding Opioid Use Disorder (OUD)

What is OUD?

- A chronic medical condition involving the misuse of opioids, including prescription pain relievers, heroin, and synthetic opioids.
- It can lead to addiction, physical dependence, and overdose.
- Impact of OUD:
 - Significant public health issue with long-term health, social, and economic consequences.



Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD)

What is MOUD?

- Medications prescribed as part of a comprehensive treatment plan to help individuals with OUD manage withdrawal symptoms, reduce cravings, and prevent relapse.

Role of CHWs in MOUD:

- Support patients in understanding and adhering to their prescribed MOUD regimen.
- Educate patients about the benefits and potential side effects of MOUD.
- Encourage long-term recovery and relapse prevention.



CHWs' Role in Supporting MOUD Adherence

Building Trust: Establishing a strong, supportive relationship to reduce stigma and encourage medication adherence.

Patient Education:

- Explain how medications work and their role in recovery.
- Address concerns or misconceptions about medications.
- Motivational Interviewing: Using a patient-centered approach to encourage individuals to stay engaged in their treatment.



CHWs in Reducing Stigma Around OUD

Stigma and OUD:

- Many individuals with OUD face judgment from others, which can hinder their treatment and recovery efforts.

How CHWs Reduce Stigma:

- By sharing personal stories or peer experiences, CHWs normalize OUD treatment.
- Provide emotional support to help patients navigate societal stigma.
- Educate families and communities to foster acceptance and understanding.



CHWs as Advocates for Better Treatment Access

Role of Advocacy:

- CHWs advocate for patients by helping them access treatment options, social services, and community support.
- Assist in overcoming barriers such as transportation, insurance, and housing that can impede treatment adherence.

Collaboration with Providers:

- CHWs work closely with healthcare providers to ensure the holistic treatment needs of patients are met.



Case Study: CHWs in Action

- **Story 1:** A CHW in a rural community helped a patient with OUD understand the benefits of MOUD and assisted in overcoming barriers to treatment access, leading to improved adherence and a decrease in overdose incidents.
- **Story 2:** A CHW provided education to a family dealing with an individual's opioid use disorder, which helped reduce stigma and allowed the family to better support their loved one through treatment.



Benefits of CHWs in OUD Treatment

Improved Patient Engagement:

- Increased likelihood of treatment adherence due to ongoing support and motivation.

Stronger Recovery Outcomes:

- Enhanced long-term recovery outcomes by offering personalized care, education, and connections to resources.

Cost-Effectiveness:

- CHWs reduce the overall cost of healthcare by reducing emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and relapses.



Challenges and Barriers for CHWs in OUD Treatment

Challenges:

- Lack of funding and resources for CHWs.
- Overcoming skepticism from patients or healthcare professionals.
- High workload and burnout.

Overcoming Barriers:

- Support from community organizations and healthcare systems.
- Ongoing professional development and training for CHWs.

Break
Barriers



Questions and Comments



Demonstrating the positive impact of CHWs on patient outcomes in the behavioral health and OUD space

- In a Massachusetts program, CHWs supporting individuals with OUD increased retention in medication-assisted treatment (MAT) by 30% compared to standard care.
- (**Source:** Massachusetts Department of Public Health)
- A study in New Mexico found that patients with serious mental illness supported by CHWs were twice as likely to adhere to antipsychotic medications.
- (**Source:** American Journal of Public Health, 2016)

In a Philadelphia behavioral health program, CHW involvement led to a 26% decrease in ED visits and a 19% drop in psychiatric hospitalizations within 12 months.

(**Source:** National Council for Mental Wellbeing)

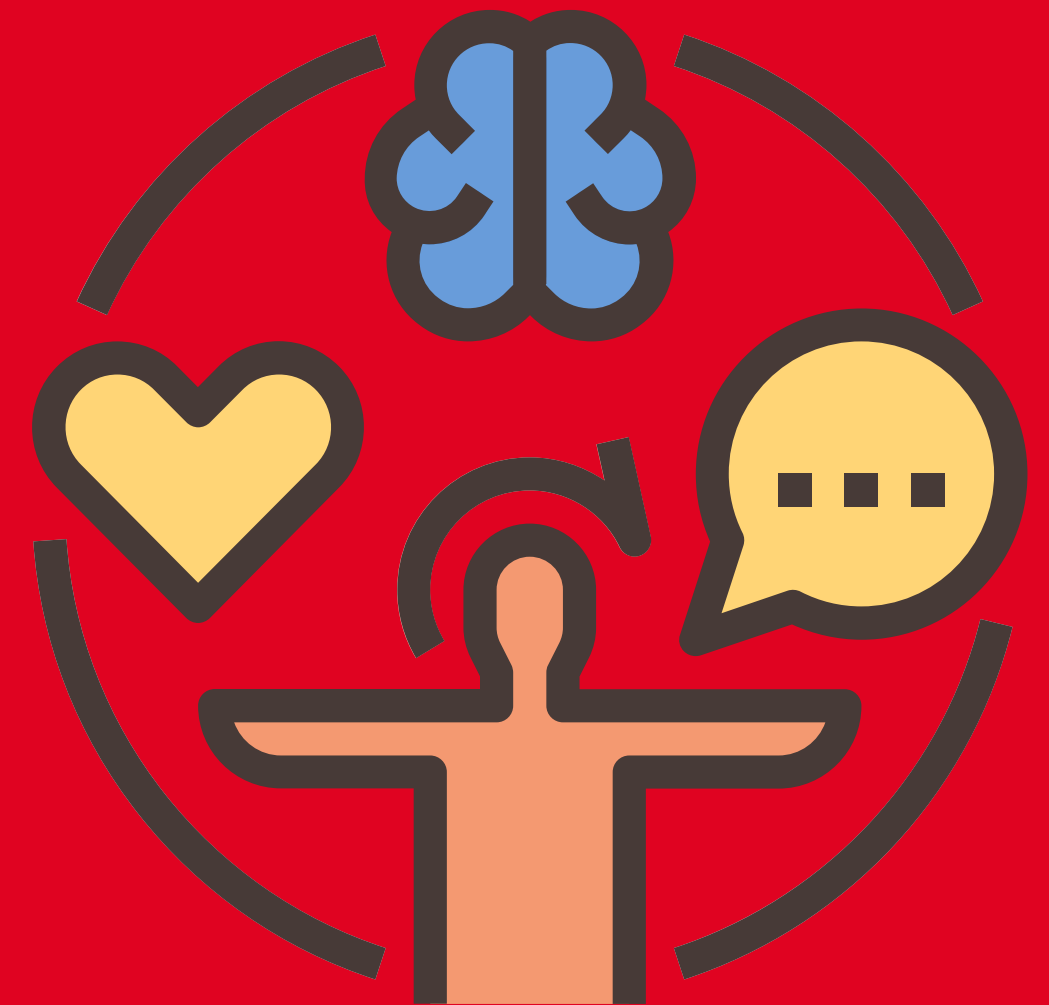
The Future of CHWs in Behavioral Health and OUD

Growing Demand: The role of CHWs is expected to expand as more people with OUD and behavioral health issues seek care.

Opportunities:

- Expanding into telehealth and virtual support services.
- Increasing community-based initiatives and outreach efforts.

Need for Advocacy: Continued efforts to secure funding and support for CHW programs.



The Future of Community Health Workers in Behavioral Health

- Formal Integration into Behavioral Health Teams
- CHWs should increasingly be embedded in multidisciplinary care teams—including alongside therapists, social workers, and peer specialists—especially in Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs) and integrated care models.
- **Future trend:** CHWs trained in mental health first aid and trauma-informed care will serve as a frontline extension of clinical providers.
- **Future trend:** Expect more states to adopt Medicaid billing codes for CHW behavioral health services, enabling long-term financial sustainability.



How organizations and systems can support CHWs for long-term success


- Behavioral health organizations and systems can support Community Health Workers (CHWs) for long-term success by investing in their development, integrating them meaningfully care teams, and creating sustainable funding and supervision structures.



How organizations and systems can support CHWs for long-term success

1. Establish Clear Roles and Scope of Practice


- Define CHW responsibilities specific to behavioral health (e.g., outreach, health coaching, system navigation, peer support).
- Clarify how CHWs complement, not duplicate, clinical roles like case managers or therapists.

 Why it matters:
Role clarity reduces
burnout and
enhances team
collaboration.

How organizations and systems can support CHWs for long- term success

2. Provide Ongoing, Specialized Training

- Offer behavioral health-specific training, including:
- Mental health first aid
- Motivational interviewing
- Trauma-informed care
- Suicide risk identification
- Harm reduction and substance use navigation
- Build in continuing education opportunities

 Why it matters: Well-trained CHWs are more confident, competent, and effective in complex care settings.

How organizations and systems can support CHWs for long- term success

3. Ensure Meaningful Team Integration

- Include CHWs in team meetings, case conferences, and care planning.
- Establish two-way communication channels with clinicians and supervisors.
- Promote mutual respect between CHWs and licensed providers.

🎯 Why it matters:
Integration improves patient
outcomes and helps CHWs
feel valued and heard.

How Can Behavioral Health Organizations Fund CHW Roles

Assembly Bill 191 (AB191), enacted in 2021, was a pivotal piece of legislation in Nevada that laid the groundwork for Medicaid reimbursement of Community Health Worker (CHW) services.

- Prior to AB191, Nevada Medicaid did not recognize CHWs as reimbursable providers.
- AB191 mandated that the State Plan for Medicaid include coverage for CHW services under certain circumstances, thereby establishing a framework for reimbursement.
- This legislation was instrumental in integrating CHWs into the Medicaid system, facilitating their role in chronic disease management and prevention within various settings, including homes and clinical environments.

Legislation in Nevada

- In Nevada, Senate Bill 117 (**SB117**) enacted in 2023, authorizes behavioral health companies and other healthcare providers to utilize Community Health Workers (CHWs) and receive Medicaid reimbursement for their services. This legislation expands the types of providers under whose supervision CHWs can operate—including physicians, physician assistants, and advanced practice registered nurses — and mandates their inclusion in the State Plan for Medicaid.
- **Source:** ([Bill Text: NV SB117 | 2023 | 82nd Legislature
- State Plan for Medicaid: Inclusion of requirement for payment of certain costs for services provided by community health worker, Nev. Rev. Stat. § 422.2722

Legislation in Nevada

- Additionally, Assembly Bill 138 (**AB138**), also passed in 2023, provides Medicaid coverage for certain types of behavioral health integration services. While AB138 focuses on behavioral health integration models, it complements **SB117** by broadening the scope of reimbursable services within behavioral health care. ([AB138 | Nevada 2023-2024 |
- **Source:** (BDR38-332) | TrackBill](<https://trackbill.com/bill/nevada-assembly-bill-138-provides-medicaid-coverage-for-certain-types-of-behavioral-health-integration-services-bdr38-332/2362568/?>)

Questions and Comments



How Does One Become Trained as a CHW?



Who Do We Certify:

- Community Health Worker (CHW) I and II
- Peer Recovery and Support Specialists (PRSS) (IC&RC)
- PRSS Supervisors and PRSS Interns
- Prevention Specialists (PS) (IC&RC)
- Birth Doula

State Certified CHW Trainings in Nevada

- College of Southern Nevada
- High Sierra AHEC (Employer/Funder contracted)
- Nevada Community Health Worker Association
- Truckee Meadows Community College



Summary and Conclusion

- CHWs are a vital component of the healthcare and behavioral health ecosystem, particularly for individuals with OUD. They improve patient engagement, provide essential support, and help reduce barriers to treatment.
- By utilizing specific interventions such as education, motivational interviewing, and advocacy, CHWs can improve patient outcomes.
- Successful integration of CHWs into existing care programs enhances care coordination and treatment success, ensuring that patients with OUD receive comprehensive, holistic support.



Thanks For
✦✦ Listening ✨

Additional Resources



The National Association of Community Health Workers (NACHW) was founded in April 2019 after several years of planning and organizing by Community Health Workers (CHWs) and allies across the United States. NACHW is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit membership-driven organization with a mission to unify CHWs.



In an effort to unite CHWs here in Nevada I've started a Community Health Worker Coalition of Nevada. There's a private Facebook group and LinkedIn Group. We will be working with the NVCHWA in the future to start a membership site with resources, a job board and CE Trainings. Coming Soon!

Questions and Comments

