



Leading Through **COVID-19**

IMPACTING COMMUNITY HEALTH: USING OUR EMBEDDED ARMIES

COVID-19 has shaken every aspect of our lives. The far-reaching impact on social determinants in our communities consumes the daily headlines. Though we are all in it together, the evidence is clear that particular communities have been hit harder than others. We have historically called these vulnerable communities. We've identified them as elderly, minority, poor, rural, shut-ins or simply sick with chronic or preexisting conditions. These communities are OUR communities. They are our neighbors. They live among us. They suffer as we suffer. If they are vulnerable, then we are also vulnerable. COVID-19, health care in general, or anything else for that matter, is not an "over

there" problem. It is our problem. It affects our communities. It affects our neighbors, both friends and strangers. We can't keep them away, and we don't want to. We must serve and be good neighbors.

While hospitals and health systems play a vital role in elevating all areas of community health, this role has obviously not been as proactively addressed while battling the pandemic. The need still exists, and the strategies to address them is still required. An important part of defeating this virus is equipping, training and utilizing an army of "neighbors" to engage on the frontlines in the

next phase of this fight. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Johns Hopkins University, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Kaiser Foundation, the Department of Health and Human Services and other organizations agree surveillance testing and contact tracing

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will be required on a massive scale if we are to be in a position to declare victory.¹

Though federal and state governments may provide the environment and resources to attempt such a feat, the hands-on work is done in the communities—neighborhood to neighborhood and block to block. Individuals within the community must rise up. The great news is they have been. From coast to coast and from small towns to big cities, some members from these communities have responded with, “Here I am. Send me.”

Local officials and municipalities across the country are trying to create and expand this force. They are recruiting furloughed workers from government, public service and various industries to be quickly taught the skills needed to help with testing and contact tracing, and then deployed around town. The recruiting effort is a noble undertaking, but its core objective seems to overlook, not supplement, the highly capable resource already in place.

This resource is already a fully trained, fully capable, fully eager group of professionals who are ready to serve. They are already embedded in every community, even in the “vulnerable” communities. They are our Community Health Workers (CHWs). These frontline public health workers are trusted members of and/or have an unusually close understanding of the community served. This enables a CHW to serve as 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.² Like all professional health workers, they have a calling to serve and to save lives. Unlike most health workers, however, their calling is specifically to the communities where they live. They are organically raised. They have not only deep relationships in the health system but also in the barber shops, nail

salons, gyms, schools and houses of worship. They are compassionate, professional, accessible and committed to the long-term health and security of their communities. They are our everyday neighbors, yet they are often our unsung and underutilized heroes.

Every health system, municipality and county health office, regardless of size, should be partnering with local and regional community health workers. As neighbors to these professionals, we should seek ways to raise funds and resources that help sustain their operations. It’s easy. It only takes three steps and the will to take them:

- 1 Contact the National Association of Community Health Workers (<https://nachw.org>) to find CHWs in the area.
- 2 Schedule a time for a virtual visit to ask how to best work together.
- 3 Listen closely and implement even one suggestion that will contribute to their efforts and help them make a monumental impact on local pandemic initiatives and community health overall.

Partnering with existing community health workers can quickly elevate COVID-19 efforts that will be scalable to other community operations while moving forward into the new health care landscape with our neighbors.

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¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/principles-contact-tracing.html>, April 29,2020; <https://hub.jhu.edu/2020/04/24/contact-tracing-crystal-watson/>, April 24,2020.

² <https://nachw.org/about/>, May 21, 2020.