

FIRSTHEALTH COMMUNITY VOICES FACT SHEET



Community Health Workers Help Fill Gaps



BACKGROUND

FirstHealth of the Carolinas (FirstHealth) is a not-for-profit health system serving a largely rural 15-county area in the mid-Carolinas. Its mission is “to care for people.” One of the ways it cares for people is through its involvement in establishing community resource centers in Moore County. Three centers are staffed by community outreach workers who help people in need find access to public health insurance, social services, emergency food and financial assistance, prescription drug assistance and language services for recent Hispanic immigrants.

Community outreach workers – also called community health workers, lay health advisers or *promotoros* - are not health care professionals. They are persons who receive training in culturally appropriate health education and outreach, especially among groups that have traditionally lacked adequate health care. No matter what they are called, community health workers help underserved groups access critical health and social services and reduce disparities.

LOCAL FACTS

- ♦ The average per capita income of African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics in the primary FirstHealth service area is \$9,958 – just over the federal poverty level.
- ♦ African Americans and Native Americans in the FirstHealth service area are uninsured at higher rates than the White population. Hispanics are twice as likely as other groups to be uninsured.
- ♦ Local community health survey results show serious disparities in self-reported health status among residents based on income, sex, county of residence and race.
- ♦ FirstHealth and other organizations are showing that community health workers contribute greatly to the more efficient operation of health care and social services safety nets.

STATE FACTS

- ♦ Community health worker programs are being implemented with great success and are helping Hispanic, African American and Native American communities in Durham, in rural eastern North Carolina and Robeson County.
- ♦ Programs include primary care access for uninsured Hispanics, breast cancer screening education for African American women and HIV/AIDS education in Native American communities.
- ♦ Many community health worker programs are grant funded, making sustainability a concern.
- ♦ Presently, Medicaid, Medicare and private insurers do not reimburse for services provided by community health workers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

North Carolina should follow the lead of the Virginia legislature and authorize the formation of a public or private commission to study the status, impact and utilization of community health worker programs. Data and lessons learned could be shared, and best practices for training and career development could be defined. Based on its findings, such a commission could make recommendations on means to expand community worker programs to improve public health throughout the state.