

Community Health Worker Initiative Assessment Report Executive Summary

The Whatcom Alliance for Health Advancement (WAHA) is spearheading a Community Health Worker (CHW) Initiative for Whatcom County, the first phase of which is a community assessment. This report describes the assessment process, presents key findings, and makes recommendations for next steps.

Information was gathered via web research, email inquiries, phone conversations, and in-person interviews and conversations with people, programs, and organizations involved in CHW efforts. Four interrelated areas were researched:

- Current CHW activity and infrastructure in Whatcom County, and level of interest in developing local CHW capacity.
- The communities of Sumas, Everson and Nooksack, and the Latino population living there – the selected focus population for this initiative.
- Resources and trends in CHW workforce development.
- Other CHW programs' "lessons learned" that could benefit Whatcom County's Initiative.

Key Findings:

- Numerous Whatcom County organizations have staff participating in some aspect of CHW work; however, there is great variability in the interpretation and operationalization of the CHW role, and little communication or coordination among CHWs.
- There is no local structure supporting CHWs in Whatcom County, providing training, or advocating for a collective CHW voice in health care transformation efforts.
- There is general awareness that CHWs are an important aspect of the North Sound Accountable Community of Health's (NSACH) Medicaid Demonstration projects, and strong interest in establishing and/or enhancing the CHW role in Whatcom County.
- Sumas, Everson, and Nooksack generally see themselves as three unique communities, each with its own individual identity.
- The area is experiencing significant growth of a largely commuter population. At the same time, key services in the area, such as grocery stores and medical practices, are closing.
- The Nooksack Valley School District (NVSD) encompasses Sumas, Everson, and Nooksack and surrounding areas, and to some extent unifies these otherwise separate communities.
- The NVSD is community-oriented, seeks partnerships to provide services to students and families, and is interested in exploring collaboration on a CHW project.
- The Latino community in Whatcom County is not a homogenous group, and there are significant populations of immigrant indigenous groups from Guatemala and Mexico.

- It takes a long time to build trust between community organizations and the Latino/indigenous community. Therefore, CHW work should be approached with a commitment to longevity and sustainability.
- Whatcom County's participation in the WA State Department of Health's CHW training program has been very low.
- The Area Health Education Center for Western Washington (AHECWW) is now located at Whatcom Community College and is very interested in CHW workforce development.
- Some of the North Sound Accountable Community of Health's Medicaid Demonstration Projects involve developing CHW roles.
- CHW collaboratives based in Pierce, Clark and Spokane counties are models for providing ongoing support for CHWs and increasing their capacity and impact.
- The Foundation for Healthy Generations is a leader in CHW program development and has provided funding for CHW initiatives in other parts of the state.

The assessment findings lead to three recommendations for Whatcom County:

1. Increase Whatcom's CHW capacity through training and coordination, including the possibility of an ongoing CHW network or collaborative.
2. Continue to explore a Latino CHW initiative in Sumas, Everson, and Nooksack.
3. Establish regular communication with the North Sound Accountable Community of Health, Area Health Education Center for Western Washington, Foundation for Healthy Generations, and other regional or state organization to identify opportunities for CHW workforce or program development.