

Community Health Champions are people who, with training and support, voluntarily bring their ability to relate to people and their own life experience to transform health and well-being in their communities. (Altogether Better, 2010)

Although the term 'Community Health Champion' is relatively new the idea that people can become leaders, educators, supporters and helpers around health issues in their community is not new. There are many roles that support this approach such as; community health workers, lay health workers, community development and health workers, peers, support workers etc. There are other approaches that are based on broadly similar understanding of how community members can promote health, though not all of them are informed by an empowerment model.

NICE Guidance on Community Engagement recommends recruiting community members 'to plan and deliver health promotion activities and help address the wider determinants of health'. They say, 'health champions are individuals who possess the experience, enthusiasm and skills to encourage and support other individuals to engage in health promotion activities. They also ensure that the health issues facing communities remain high on the agenda of organisations that can effect change.'

Community Health Champions help others to enjoy healthier lives by raising awareness of health and healthier choices, sharing health messages, removing barriers and creating supportive networks and environments. The experience from Leeds in England shows 'Champions are also influencing and shaping local services, increasing civic participation, initiating community development opportunities and gaining skills to move into further training, volunteering roles and employment.' (Altogether Better, 2010)

'Serious health inequalities do not arise by chance, and they cannot be simply attributed to genetic makeup, 'bad', unhealthy behaviour, or difficulties in access to medical care, important as those factors may be.' (Marmot)

There is an abundance of literature and evidence identifying the causes of health inequalities and highlighting the need to address the social determinants of health. People need to be supported at an individual level to build their capacity and increase the control they have over the events that influence their lives and health. However, health inequalities mirror structural inequalities in society and so the challenge is to work for environmental, organisational and system change.

'How do people (who have been ground down by unemployment, low wages, bad housing, poor diet etc) begin to participate in policy making and to look at their needs, not on solutions imposed from the outside?' (Jones, 1992)

Community empowerment builds from individual action and this approach embraces collective action. Create the conditions where people can make and sustain health changes and where they can be active participants and engage with people who are facing similar problems.

Community Empowerment as a continuum



COMMUNITY HEALTH CHAMPIONS

17

FACTSHEET

“Improving health literacy aims to influence not only individual lifestyle decisions about treatment and self-care, but also raise awareness of the determinants of health, and encourage individual and collective actions – at all levels of society which may lead to a modification of these determinants.”

(Making Life Better, 2014)

Key characteristics of Community Health Champions:

There is sufficient evidence internationally and nation-ally to demonstrate the positive impact of lay health workers and volunteers on tackling health issues:

- Champions must be recruited from the communities in which they will work and be community based and community focused – communities may nominate or identify
- Champions have the potential to be a fantastic resource for public health. To maximise this potential the power dynamics need to be addressed
- Champions will adopt a social model of health approach and work with communities to identify and address the root causes of health inequalities
- Champions role will be proactive and engaging with local communities, community and voluntary groups and providers of services
- Champions will act as a voice for those most marginalised and affected by health inequalities
- Champions can, and will, work with individuals but the focus of their work will be on the broader issues
- Champions work will be underpinned by the values of community development
- This work will bring extra personal and social benefits for the volunteers themselves
- Champions will need on-going support in their role. This should include on-going training and a networking element that facilitates peer support.

The World Health Organisation argue that training is more likely to be effective when it involves practicing skills, is competency based and there are opportunities for ongoing education.

Positive physical and mental health outcomes for volunteers include improvements in...

- self-rated health status
- mortality
- adoption of healthy lifestyles
- quality of life
- frequency of hospitalisation
- abilities to carry out activities of daily life
- depression
- psychological distress
- self esteem

(Casiday et al, 2008)

“Health for all will be achieved by people themselves. A well informed, well-motivated and actively participating community is a key element for the attainment of the common goal.” (World Health Organisation)

WHO—What makes for successful Community Health Worker programmes?

- Community participation—involving the community in all aspects of the programme including identifying priorities
- Good, careful and sustained programme management
- Community participation in the selection of the community health workers
- Competence and practice based training relating to how and where community health workers work
- Availability of supervision and support
- Government support and adequate resources

Community Health Champions and Health Trainers are not the same thing although the roles do complement each other well. CHC work with communities to plan and deliver health promotion activities and help address the wider determinants of health. It is a community based approach to address health inequalities. Health Trainers offer individual (1-2-1) support to people who are in a position to make a change in their life. CHC, as well networked volunteers, are ideally positioned to help increase the uptake of local Health Trainer Services.

Community Health Champions

- Community focus
- Focus on social determinants of health
- Seek to empower individual and communities
- Community led and typically community based
- Work proactively engaging with local communities
- Volunteers

Health trainer

- Individually focused
- Focus on behaviour change
- Seek to deliver health messages or services
- Professionally led and typically practice based
- Work with people who would like to make a lifestyle change
- Paid staff

References

Marmot (2010) *Fair Society, Health Lives*, Final Report.

DHSPSS(2014) *Making Life Better*.

Altogether Better (2010) *Community Health Champions Evidence Review*, Final Report.

WHO (2007) *Community health workers: What do we know about them*.

Casiday et al (2008) *Volunteering and health : what impact does it really have? report to Volunteering England.*, Project Report. Volunteering England.



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND HEALTH NETWORK