

Exploring Individual Identity, Belonging, and Collective Organizing of Community Health Workers in California

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ABSTRACT

Background: Community Health Workers (CHWs) play vital roles in connecting patients to clinical and social supports. However, CHWs are also vulnerable to challenges in the workplace, highlighting the need for platforms where CHWs can organize as a workforce. This project, which is part of a larger study exploring identity, belonging, and organizing among CHWs in California, describes one process to elevate CHWs as leaders in research to inform initiatives that impact the health of communities.

Methods: This project used a Participatory Action Research approach to co-create a larger study conducted by a team of Stanford researchers, CHW Facilitators, and CHW partners from the California Association of CHWs. First, the multi-organizational team recruited CHW Facilitators. Second, they developed a curriculum through a review of popular education and previous CHW trainings. Finally, CHW Facilitators were trained to host focus groups in their geographic regions.

Outcomes: This process resulted in the development of an eight-hour research curriculum for CHWs. Six CHWs Facilitators were trained using this curriculum, and project tools were developed based on CHW input.

Conclusions: Several factors enabled the development of this collaborative process. First, partnership with Regional Coordinators, who were well-connected to local CHW organizations, enabled identification of Facilitators. Second, the use of Zoom at convenient times made training sessions accessible. Finally, the co-creation of team goals laid a foundation of trust. We conclude that researchers can use a Participatory Action Research approach to partner with CHWs in the development of studies that elevate community expertise as a valuable form of knowledge to advance health equity.

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