

Community Health Workers' Role in DEI

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Rhiannon Bednar (RB): Welcome to Ideas for Practice, a podcast of the Region V Public Health Training Center. As one of the 10 public health training centers across the country, the RVPHTC seeks to strengthen the skills of the current and future public health workforce in order to improve population health outcomes. We hope this podcast will share insights and spark ideas among those working in public health practice. Thank you for tuning into our episode. Today we'll be talking all about community health workers' role in diversity, equity, and inclusion, which we'll refer to as DEI. I'm your host, Rhiannon Bednar.

In this episode, we'll be hearing from two community health workers to gain insight on a community health worker's role in DEI and how community health workers, which we may refer to as CHWs, can promote DEI within their communities. Our guests today are Andrea Krotzer-Burton and Mike Young from Everyday Life Consulting. Mike is an anthropologist and community health worker who also trains on cultural competency. Andrea is the Vice President of Training and a community health worker who also trains and mentors other CHWs. Today, Mike and Andrea are here to talk with us about this important topic. Welcome to the podcast. I'm excited to speak with you both today.

Andrea Krotzer-Burton (AK): Yeah, thank you for having us. We are absolutely stoked to be here. And for both Mike and I, it's always a pleasure to talk about CHWs.

Mike Young (MY): Absolutely. Thank you so much. Excited to be here.

RB: Great. So can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and your work?

AK: Yeah. So this is Andrea here. And my work started about 25 years ago. I was working in the eye care field, helping individuals with chronic diseases to educate them about how to avoid blindness and how to do that through proper nutrition and taking medications appropriately and how to just overall have better eye health. And since that role, I have evolved and now I teach and mentor CHWs and have for seven years. And I absolutely love helping CHWs through empowerment and compassion.

MY: Yeah. Hey, awesome. So I'm Mike. And I came into this work while I was in grad school studying cultural anthropology. I'd been learning about social issues and understanding neat ways to understand how they all work. Then a nonprofit organization using the community health worker model, focusing on the Latino communities in South Carolina kind of just fell on my lap. And I was just hooked right then. I was just wow, all the stuff I've been reading about and how to make real change, this is how it's actually done. And they're doing it. So from there, I kept devoting my energies and backgrounds to strengthen this workforce and partners to better understand how to best work with individuals and communities. DEI is a perfect area for me to apply the anthropology and what I've been focusing on in my education around as well.

RB: Great. Thank you both for sharing and for being here with us today and sharing some of the experiences that you've had as a CHW. So I'd like to start us off today talking just a little bit more generally about CHWs and their role in DEI. So can you describe a CHW's role in DEI and how they can promote DEI within their work in the community?

AK: Yeah, I'll start. CHWs are the best at DEI and promoting anti-stigma conversations. They are very confident when it comes to different cultures, beliefs, and making sure everyone feels heard and included based on individual needs. They're really, really culturally competent when it comes to DEI.

MY: Absolutely. Coming from the communities where they serve, right? So one of the amazing strengths that CHWs possess is their resilience in applying their lived experiences to assist in preventing others from some of the suffering and trauma that they might have experienced themselves. That dedication to others and the ability to reflect deeply is a beautiful way CHWs are able to empathize and demonstrate what empathy looks like, how it needs to be done, and that is the nature of DEI. Understanding the experiences of others and making room for their strengths to shine.

RB: And so to follow up on that, it can often be challenging to actually operationalize equity and to really see it in action. So what does equity look like when it's done correctly?

AK: Well, CHWs work with communities at a grassroots level to ensure that there is an intentional focus on equitable actions. But I'm going to lean on Mike here to get a little bit more of an expanded answer to this question because he is an expert in this arena and I really believe that he has a lot of really great things to say.

MY: Thanks. Yes, equity, right? It's a term that's confusing. A lot of times it seems so broad. It's like where to start and how, right? But really it's just realizing that it is going to take more than one approach, more than one solution to best be able to serve and provide support and care for a wide variety of people with their unique circumstances. This can look like having an organization realize it's going to take more time, more gas to reach individuals and families that live further away from the city centers. This impacts numbers of individuals served. So being mindful to include necessary adjustments to expectations along these lines is important.

Equity is about allowing individuals' experiences to be heard, respected, acknowledged, and responded to in a dignified way. This is tailoring our approaches to the needs, which can be seen and done with like American Disabilities Act requirements. Without the individuals with lived experiences, voices, these kinds of changes wouldn't be heard as loudly. It's about doing the work to ensure you are truly engaging with the communities in a meaningful way to make sure they are able to express their dreams, desires, and contributions they would like to make.

MY: Once this is done, you see organizations having programs that incorporate community advisory councils to check the efficacy of their programs based on how they're experienced by those receiving the services and hopefully a sort of feedback loop can happen where programs continually shift and adapt to the changing landscape and experiential realities of the individuals themselves. This can be moving outreach times, locations, languages, ways of interacting, what exchanges are appropriate, and so on.

So basically, yeah, it's about creating tailored approaches for each community. So understanding the experience of these communities and then working to make it match so that they can drive that kind of change that they already know that they need.

RB: Thank you. Yeah, that's really helpful to see what it looks like in action. And I think it's also really important that you mentioned it can take more than one approach or solution to support and care for a variety of people who have unique circumstances. And I'm sure that figuring out which approaches or solutions may work with different individuals and communities does take just some time and experience. But if a community health worker is, let's say, newer to the field or maybe more unfamiliar with DEI, how can they actively work to strengthen their knowledge and skills?

AK: Yeah, so I would say that they can educate themselves through cultural humility, which actually CHWs have a lot of opportunity there as well. Ask questions of the community members to be certain they understand their beliefs, feelings, or thoughts about treatments, resources, and solutions to resolve issues they may be facing.

MY: Yeah, it's really about kind of like putting yourself out there and building trust. So when you want to understand a community that you might not be familiar with, you just kind of have to spend time and make mistakes even, right? Be vulnerable and basically get that trust built up through spending time together, getting yourself known, getting to know them. Your intentions become clear through your actions, right? So being able and open to understand that community and families are our teachers to help us better understand them and their communities is a major first step. We must see ourselves as learning at the feet of the community.

They are the experts in their own experiences, and we must see the diverse experiences as assets to move our work toward being as effective as possible. It requires the ability to apply the strength-based approach to how we view others as a whole, realizing that communities know the solutions to their problems since they are the ones experiencing them, and our role is listeners and advocates while integrating their involvement throughout the process. We really got to listen and give that platform to open up. That's kind of that open cultural humility piece.

In practical steps, I would recommend finding other mentors who have been known to do great work in this field. Make friends with them like Andrea.

MY: Sit down and have coffee with them. Create a space and a relationship where any and all questions can be asked and answered and learn from what they have gained and try to make it applicable or adaptable to their role and organizational practices. It's just got to be willing to be vulnerable and ask questions and learn.

AK: And if I could add real quick, I would also like to add in to just ask questions. If you don't know, ask questions because we are all different and unique. We all come from a different set of family backgrounds and rules and different things like that. We've all come through different lived experiences, and the things that you've been through and that you know of and are aware of, be willing to be vulnerable enough, as Mike stated, to share with others. CHWs have a really good way of making friends. It's like you think of a CHW as an individual who doesn't have enemies, right? They make a friend wherever they go.

And we've seen this... Mike and I have both seen this time and time again through the different spaces that we associate with around CHWs and different things and in our classrooms and things like that. And just be open. Be open to differences. Be willing to ask questions and just open up and share your story as well because you never know about your diversity and how that's going to also encourage others as well.

RB: Yeah, that's great. Thank you both. And along those lines, what advice do you have for community health workers who may be working or interacting with individuals from different backgrounds and cultures? And I know you touched on some of this a little bit in the previous question, but anything else you'd like to add to that?

AK: Yeah, so I would say that, again, piggybacking off what we had recently stated, but get to know people. And I mean, truly know them for them. Ask questions. Answer questions. And be open to differences and understand that every human is unique and that we all just want to be seen and heard. We can do this by encouraging cultural diffusion. Just include those. And don't bucket people into different buckets or what have you. Let's all just be one. And when we have that mindset and when we think of it from that perspective, not bucketing folks, it makes it much easier to realize that you're already part of or you already are engaging in that DE&I perspective.

MY: Yeah, I would say also like I said earlier, be willing to make a mistake and be shown the right way. I actually just got back from Alabama yesterday. And so I'm giving this talk, and I was approached. And after I had gone through one of my, this is how you make mistakes. Be vulnerable. Be taught. And I was told it's pronounced mobile. Mobile, Alabama. And I had been saying mobile, right? And I felt terrible, and I apologized. But that's me making a cultural faux pas, right? That's me messing up. But me being gracious and asking for grace in that space of hey, I made a mistake. I should have known better. But look, now I know, and I won't make that mistake again.

MY: That's kind of one of the big things that we really need to get people feeling confident about themselves so that they're willing to make mistakes. Don't let your fears of making a mistake paralyze you. That's where growth happens in the process of making a mistake. Those of us who get into this kind of work typically want to see others succeed, right? I love when we call this workforce a radical militant army of care bears. But I also know that those of us who want to do right by everyone sometimes hesitate in certain situations where they aren't familiar in fear of offending.

But I remind people, your big heart, your intentions become clear through your actions. People can pick up on what kind of person you are. If you make a mistake, apologize. Learn why it was a mistake. These kinds of things happen all the time by us and to us, and we give others grace, right? Well, we also receive grace. Have confidence in your compassion. We use a phrase called oops, ouch, whoa. The first mistake is an oops. Oftentimes it can be easily corrected once shown the right appropriate way, and everything is good. Learning happened. But if the same mistake is made after you've been shown, it moves from an oops to an ouch, because now you knew better. So take the opportunity to let these learning lessons become whoa moments. Culture and things that matter to others pop up surprisingly sometimes. It's okay to not know.

RB: That's great. I think that oops, ouch, whoa is a really good phrase, and I hope that that advice is something that our listeners will be able to take home with them today, because sometimes a CHW or really anyone for that matter, may come across a situation where they say or do something that offends another person, even if they didn't mean it, it wasn't intentional. So is there anything else you would recommend for this type of situation?

AK: I would say definitely offer grace. Be willing to accept grace. Be willing to make the changes needed to not make this a pattern. And have fun with it. Oftentimes, like Mike stated in the previous statements, don't make it awkward. Don't look like a deer in headlights. If you don't know, you don't know, and it's okay. That's how we grow. That's how we develop. And that's how CHWs, or anyone, honestly, becomes culturally humble. And that's how you gain that cultural humility, because we understand that the world really is a melting pot. And even if people look the same as you, and you feel like they're from the same community and things, understanding that their path is different, and that it's all unique to them, and just, I think, have fun with it. And just be open to and willing to share and learn and listen, and like Mike said, just accept it. And it's a wonderful, wonderful thing when you start to look at things a bit differently, and it becomes a little bit brighter, I would say.

MY: Yeah, I think coming across those situations where there's the potential to offend, best advice is kind of like don't make it weird. Be cool, baby. You know what I mean? It's going to happen. It's all right. Just kind of roll with it. Sometimes it's okay. You've got to just realize that we have these internal thinkings, and it's our way to process it, right? And then thinking through each situation uniquely is how we're going to get to the next step. But sometimes our understandings are infused so heavily with stereotypes or lacking awareness that we don't realize what we say or think is incorrect or possibly hurtful.

MY: First step, take it seriously when you're told, right? If you're corrected, and then apologize genuinely. And third, admit that this was an area that you may not have realized you needed to learn more and grow from. Thank the individual for bringing it to your attention, and promise to not make a similar mistake moving forward. That's probably the best way to do it.

RB: Yeah, that's really helpful. Thank you. And so we've talked a lot about CHWs and their role in DEI today, but to kind of just help us bring it all together, do you have any specific stories or examples that you could share that really highlight a CHW or a CHW organization in their work with DEI?

AK: Yeah, thanks for that question. I don't have any specific stories to share. However, I will share that CHWs are practicing DEI all the time. And I would even add justice in there, and I know that's not part of it, but justice is really around those policies and just bringing advocacy and awareness. It is part of their foundation's training, and it is a very important practice for all CHWs. CHWs are very good at being intentional to take on a diverse, equitable, and inclusive approach to helping members of the communities that they serve. So CHWs really from the go, they're very good at DE&I, and they're willing to educate themselves and do what they need to to take it to the next level, I would say.

MY: I love that Andrea brought up the justice part. I've seen different wordings of these letters, and there's the Jedi that's out there, and I think that's really cool bringing in the Star Wars. But it's definitely important to keep that in mind too, because we're dealing with... I say community health workers are essentially public health, social work, and anthropology, right? But those things deal with inequalities, health disparities. There's things that are happening that are unfair, and we need to highlight those issues, bring attention to them so that we can change them. So naturally, there's advocacy involved, right? We're dealing with social justice because there is an unfairness happening.

So we need to highlight that through this process of talking about the unique experiences and how we can apply our energies for these unique experiences so that it becomes fair, right? But for examples, I love to share something from a training that I co-led with a CHW home visitor, and she focused on families with young children. This was at a conference. The CHW was an African-American woman from New York City, and here we are in South Carolina speaking specifically about Latino community norms here locally, right? So her wisdom and comfort speaking on this topic was incredible, and she casually said, it's because in areas like New York City, you have a wide variety of communities that are right next to each other.

So interacting with different cultures is a daily practice. She would go from Asian immigrant stores to buying snacks at Latino grocery markets and became this fish that could swim in so many waters. Her ease and comfortability was evident, and I think that's a key piece. Don't let your discomfort become a detriment to growth.

MY: Another thing she shared I loved was how oftentimes the individuals and families we support are very thankful and want to reciprocate in some way, and it's common to be offered a bag of produce grown from a backyard garden or some homemade tamales or something like that, or when in the home individuals might offer food. It's very important for a trusting relationship to be maintained between CHW and community member. Our first advice was, if you're comfortable trying new things and your organization allows you to, try it. Try something new. You might find out you love longaniza or pozole, but we understand when people have allergies, dietary restrictions, or organizations have strict policies, in these cases we recommend noting that rejecting something offered could damage a relationship.

So if possible, try this. Simply say, wow, thank you. This is great. I'm actually not hungry right now, but could I take this to go and have it when I get back home to the office? That way the exchange happens and the individual doesn't feel like their offer has been rejected for any reason. Another example is to have a mission moment, for example, during board meetings. Invite an individual who isn't shy to come share their story at a board meeting. It really connects the processes to the impact on real people's lives and gets the board level to see the community level, and you've just got to get that bright, vibrant individual, that person that doesn't get scared in these situations. I've seen that happen, and it's been wonderful.

RB: Yeah, thank you. And Andrea, just to echo what Mike said also thank you for bringing in that justice aspect to it as well. We often talk about that here at our organization. Yeah, I just want to thank you for bringing that into the conversation today. And for both of you, thank you for sharing those examples, and I think that helps us visualize how this important work really impacts people within the community. So as we close today, I just want to end by asking you, if there's one piece of information that you'd like for our listeners to keep in mind about this topic as they move on with their day, what would you like that to be?

AK: I really want to say that I would like to encourage them to do a self-awareness check and be aware of their own biases. And also, the way that I like to phrase this is, understand and be aware of your own hurts, habits, and hang-ups, because we all carry those. And when you are aware of your own hurts, habits, and hang-ups, you can understand that others have those also. And we can overcome those through taking a non-biased approach to our conversations and just being open to this whole theme today of trying new things, meeting new people, understanding them for who they are, and really getting to know them by asking them questions, answering their questions. And again, just encourage everyone to continue to embrace those things. Once you embrace that and you can overcome those, again, hurts, habits, and hang-ups, I think that's a huge win for everyone.

MY: Yeah, I think that's awesome. Hurts, habits, and hang-ups, that's awesome. I think just for me, there's one piece of advice to end this with, essentially, just remember that we're all learning. We should enjoy the learning process. Learn from everywhere and everyone. Keep being awesome.

RB: Those are great. Thank you both so much. Andrea and Mike, thank you for joining us today to share your experiences and to really provide us with some insight on this topic. And to our listeners, we hope that you've learned about CHWs and their role in DEI application today. Feel free to check out the transcript and resources in the podcast notes. Funding for this podcast is provided by the Health Resources and Services Administration. And with that, we'll end here for today. Stay safe and stay curious, everyone.

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