BUILDING BRIDGES TO HEALTH

Community Health Workers in North Dakota

FOUNDATION for a Healthy North Dakota

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Introduction

Community health is grounded in people and places. At the Foundation for a Healthy North Dakota (FHND), we are committed to connecting with grassroots leaders across the state to learn about the challenges they face and how to address them. While we face many serious public health challenges, there is innovative and important work happening in communities across the state that often gets overlooked but deserves our attention.

This guide is an opportunity to lift up what is working in community public health in North Dakota. We focus on local organizations that are grounded in the needs of the community – whether that is sharing easy-to-understand, culturally relevant health information, supporting new parents in navigating postpartum life, offering safe and accessible shelter, or connecting people to services and experts.

These organizations are often staffed by people from the community that they serve. Not only do these community health workers understand the local health issues, but they also often already have relationships with people in the community. This baseline level of trust and community connection is critical in a time of increasing polarization and mistrust of institutions.

Organizations such as Ministry on the Margins and Sacred Pipe Resource Center work directly with members of their community to understand what challenges they're facing and how to help. The Bismarck Doula Community and Mní Wičóni Health Circle work directly with families, often in their homes, to give them the support they need to navigate pregnancy and life with a newborn.

What all of these organizations have in common is that they are designing health programs from the ground up that truly meet the needs of the community.

At FHND, we are working to connect and invest more in these organizations and others just like them. Our goal is to help share and spread the best practices created by these leaders across North Dakota. We hope that you'll join us in expanding these types of programs so that more communities can experience this level of high-quality care.

Sandra Tibke

Sandra Tibke
Executive Director
Foundation for a Healthy North Dakota

Ministry on the Margins

Since 2013, Ministry on the Margins has offered support to people who have nowhere else to go. They work with those who are often overlooked or excluded, including people experiencing homelessness and people who are either currently in prison or transitioning out of incarceration and back into the community.

But just like much of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to develop new and creative ways to serve their community. The homeless shelter in Bismarck, which could serve up to 118 individuals, had recently closed.

Sister Kathleen Atkinson, OSB, a Benedictine Sister from Annunciation Monastery in Bismarck and founder of Ministry on the Margins, explained that before the pandemic, if homeless individuals were unable to get a bed in the shelter, they could have stopped inside any all-night establishments like Denny's or Walmart to get warm and use a bathroom.

The North Dakota winter season is characteristically long and cold, spanning from November into late March. Temperatures range between 2° F and 17° F, with an average of 50 days below 0°. Each year, three to four severe winter storms bring heavy snow, strong winds, and low temperatures. Living without shelter in these conditions can be a death sentence. In the pandemic, those havens were closed with no word of when — or if — they would return to their original hours.

"We came up with this idea of a pilot project for a coffeehouse — a Starbucks of the streets. We're open from 10 o'clock at night until eight in the morning," Atkinson explained.

So, on Feb. 1, 2022, Ministry on the Margins opened its very own coffee shop that had pillows and blankets in case someone needed to rest. They initially expected to serve about 10 to 15 individuals per night, but now they typically host about 55 people every night.

The Ministry identifies its coffee shop as low-barrier, meaning that it is open to all.

In contrast, local high-barrier shelters have requirements that individuals must be able to pass, such as drug and alcohol tests, mental health assessments, and the need to be able to climb to the top of a bunk bed.

Who Are Community Health Workers?

Community Health Workers (CHWs) are public health workers who act as connectors, advocates, and navigators in their communities. Often from the communities they serve and with similar lived experiences, CHWs build trusting relationships with clients to help them access health care and social services, stay on top of their health issues, and translate complicated health information.

“Our idea is nobody deserves to be outside, even if you are in active addiction,” Atkinson explained. The Ministry’s employees are trained to administer Narcan, and local law enforcement has provided training on how to de-escalate conflict.

On top of the coffee shop and the food pantry, Atkinson said the Ministry serves as a post office for “about 95 people” so that individuals can apply for jobs or benefits.

About half of the Ministry’s 19 employees are Second Chance hires, meaning they were previously incarcerated, as the organization does a lot of work with prison reentry. The Ministry will often pair their Second Chance hires with an addiction counselor or social worker as they find it makes for more effective outreach. Because their Second Chance hires share many of the same lived experiences as the people that the Ministry serves, they can quickly establish trust and rapport with clients. This type of connection can be a critical component in connecting people to services or keeping them engaged with the Ministry. As Atkinson explained it, “They've proved themselves. They're not right out of prison, but they know the streets, they know addiction, they know the games.”

In addition to these resources, the Ministry also provides several health services to the community. They have hired social workers and a behavioral health specialist, and once a month, it has an eye doctor come in to perform exams and a professional who performs acupuncture and craniosacral therapy. The Ministry also offers hand and foot services—which Atkinson said includes everything from frostbite treatments to mani-pedis—and free haircuts.

Raquel Doll, a behavioral health specialist, hosts “open hours” from 2 to 4 p.m. every Tuesday while the coffee shop hosts ice cream socials. If they choose, the individuals they serve meet with Doll or the other social workers to help them with anything from filling out housing applications to simply calling family members.

One of the lessons that Doll said she and the Ministry quickly learned was the value of personalized approaches. Every person they serve is different, so allowing each individual to make their own decisions regarding their lives and their care gives them a bit of power back.

“This work isn't about me or the Ministry — it's not about us who work here — it's about the people we serve. When we see success in our people, that’s success for us,” Doll explained.

Atkinson added that the Ministry continues to advocate for those who are “falling through the cracks” by uplifting their voices and listening to them. They also extend their help to anyone who needs it, as they look at their community like a family. “Nobody’s in our program, but everyone is,” Atkinson said.

Sacred Pipe Resource Center

For Native Americans, the U.S. healthcare system has historically, and to this day, not always been a welcoming and affirming space. To establish that desired safe space, a group of Native Americans founded Sacred Pipe Resource Center in 2007 to help members of their community who did not live on reservations.

Sacred Pipe Resource Center established a new program called "Medicine Stone," a monthly series of group sessions in which they share educational materials or bring in speakers to talk about health-specific topics, such as diabetes.

Executive Director Cheryl Kary explained that several members of the community expressed that they did not feel like they were able to ask their doctors questions about their health and felt like their concerns were being overlooked.

"This model allows them to ask questions, to bring in the outside factors, the cultural factors, environmental factors, the social factors that impact their health, and that could be barriers," Kary explained.

After working at Indian Health Services for 11 years, Patti Harrison joined Sacred Pipe Resource Center as its director of health engagement. She explained that while the team creates a plan at the start of the year for Medicine Stone's meetings, they're always open to input from the community.

"I look at [success] as when our community members keep coming back, and they're wanting to learn more. They're still asking questions, and they're showing up. To me, that's confirmation that we're doing something," Harrison said.

Micki Schily was familiar with Sacred Pipe Resource Center and had gone to a couple of their events, but after getting into a bad accident that forced her to stop working and eventually led her to become homeless, she turned to the organization again for support. She said Kary was the one who provided her with housing resources. In the years following, she was elected and continues to serve on the organization's Housing & Homelessness Community Council.

"Sacred Pipe's a safe place to be, to speak out where they'll hear your concerns. It really was good for my mental health. I isolated less, I felt better about myself, I felt better when I saw everything we worked so hard for coming to fruition," Schily said.

Why Community Health Workers Are Important

As trusted members of the community, CHWs can connect with people who are often excluded or under-served by traditional health institutions. Through deep community engagement and outreach, CHWs can be a bridge to healthcare services that not only improve the health and well-being of their clients, but can also help make healthcare spaces more welcoming, culturally relevant, and cost-effective.

Living in the city can be a very isolating experience for some Native Americans, often leading to stress and anxiety about the way that they're perceived in public. Because of this, Schily explained that another benefit of Sacred Pipe Resource Center is it allows for members of the community to have a safe space.

"I think about that a lot. It's one of the things that we provide — a space where you can come and you don't have to think about being judged or being watched or be anything other than just being yourself," Kary said. "I'm so happy when people come in and they get to have that moment. I don't think that non-Native people realize what a relief it is to just not have to think about how we're being presented or how we're being judged or anything like that."

Sacred Pipe Resource Center works on both physical and mental health issues within the context of culturally-based, healing-centered engagement. For example, Sacred Pipe Resource Center designed a suicide prevention video for positive mental health that centers Indigenous connection and knowledge. It is part of an overall program that includes group healthcare models, such as a new prenatal group care program called "Turtle's Nest," as well as integrated programs with healing using art and elder storytelling programs that reinforce traditional knowledge. "Healthcare looks different in Indigenous communities," says Kary, "because healing comes from positive social connections and a strong sense of self. We are trying to provide spaces for that and healthcare workers that believe that all healing begins with a healthy mindset."

Because of these safe spaces and the work Sacred Pipe Resource Center has done for Native Americans in the area, the community has come to really value their presence. When the pandemic hit, Sacred Pipe Resource Center went to stores around town to gather supplies such as masks, hand sanitizer, and cleaning supplies and distributed them to the community.

By the time vaccines began rolling out, Kary said, "We ended up partnering with Bismarck-Burleigh Public Health because they were floored by how many Natives we were able to get vaccinated under a grant we received. But it goes back to that trust factor. Again, they trusted us. So when we said, 'These vaccines are OK, they're safe,' they started coming in droves."

Harrison added, "It's so rewarding to help other people, get your community together. It's so nice to be able to give out information and to help people and just to learn so much yourself by doing that. Even though I worked in the health field, I think I learned more here than I did sitting at that desk."

Doulas in North Dakota

While pregnancy and motherhood can be joyous and desirable experiences, they can also be difficult and isolating experiences that can lead to poor health outcomes for new parents and their babies. Doulas in North Dakota are working to prevent that by helping new parents in the community gain more access to resources and support.

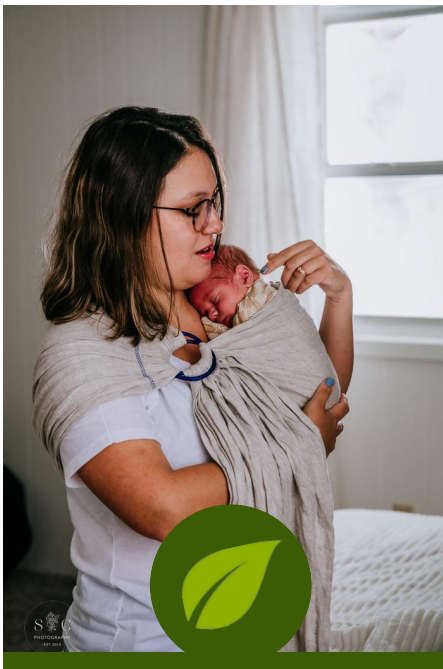
Doulas aim to give mothers more autonomy over what they want their birth to look like, one family at a time. Regina Martin has worked as a birth doula, educator, and photographer for nearly 11 years in Dickinson. She explained, “Birth does not have to look the way it does on TV or in movies. Instead of it being a terrifying, scary experience, it can be seen as an opportunity for empowerment.”

In an effort to expand community awareness about doulas and to provide more education regarding birth, breastfeeding, and other health resources, Martin helped found the Bismarck Doula Community, an organization consisting of various birth and postpartum doulas in the greater Bismarck area. While each doula works independently, they come together at least once a month to offer educational materials for new mothers and sponsor training for doulas.

One of the events they host regularly is called “Coffee with the Doulas,” where doulas will meet at a Bismarck coffeehouse once a month with mothers and community members. Andrea Evinger, a member of the organization, has been working as a postpartum doula for just over a year now but quickly became passionate about the field.

One major challenge affecting postpartum women is loneliness, as Evinger noted how rare paternity leave is. The transition to motherhood is even harder for women with no nearby family available to help out.

"I think it’s really hard as well if mom had a full-time job beforehand, and even if she’s taking maternity leave, you go from being around adults all day to being at home alone with a baby for weeks. And this is not normal. It’s not normal to be that alone,” Evinger said.



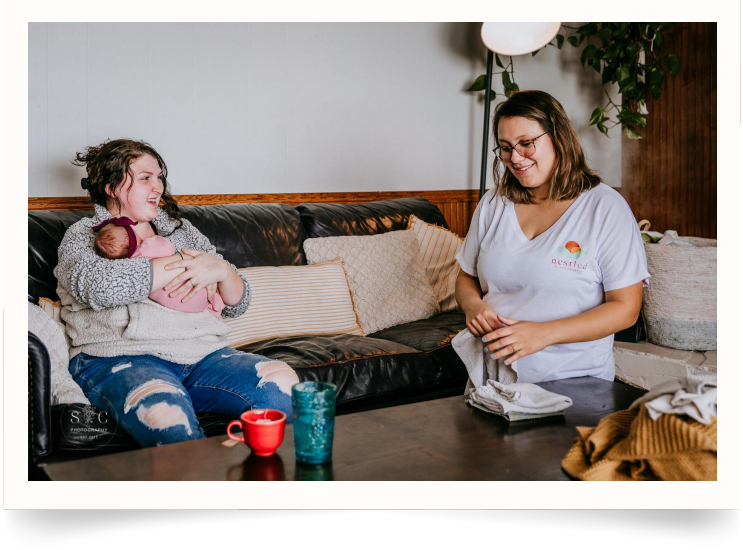
Community Health Workers Meet People Where They Are

One of the things that makes CHWs unique is that they can meet people where they are – both on their health journey and directly in their communities or homes. Taking the time to meet with people in places they feel comfortable and designing action plans to meet their specific needs leads to better health outcomes and can potentially reduce healthcare costs.

Martin also hosts a pregnancy and postpartum support group with other doulas in Dickinson several times a month. She explained, “I started that as a resource for moms struggling with perinatal mood disorders because we know that isolation is a huge trigger for those mood disorders. So, creating a community of non-judgmental support where birthing people can come before [and] after they have their baby so that they can find support, friendship, and community.”

Creating a space for moms to feel supported is important everywhere. Mní Wičóni Health Circle aims to create a community for expecting and new parents across the Standing Rock Reservation. Sunshine Claymore serves as the organization’s community engagement specialist, while also working as a birth doula. At Mní Wičóni, Claymore works with a team of individuals to promote physical, mental, and emotional health among Indigenous families. They host a variety of different health circles monthly to teach parents about anything from cultural tools to nutrition.

“We have different themed circles so that there’s a cohort and camaraderie among the birthing families. That way they know there are other people in the community who may have similar struggles or have other experiences they can use for their own learning benefit,” Claymore explained.



These kinds of connections are particularly important as many mothers do not know what life looks like after having a baby. Whether that be about their physical changes, emotional needs, or daily life with a newborn, everyone's experience is unique. The mental health challenges that come with having a baby, such as postpartum depression and anxiety, are also often stigmatized or under discussed by healthcare providers.

After developing several postpartum mood disorders herself, Taylor Wanner decided to become a postpartum doula. At that time, she was the first postpartum doula in the area. Her job specializes in life after birth and helping families become more confident in their abilities as parents.

"Postpartum is already isolating enough, and there's not a lot of education that goes into postpartum. You have to really know what to look for in order to educate yourself," Wanner said.

As postpartum doulas, Wanner and Evinger spend several hours each week going to their clients' homes and offering to help with whatever the mother needs, whether that be helping with the baby and offering advice on breastfeeding or simply helping out with chores and meal prep for the week. Wanner explained, "I always ask mom, 'What do you need most today?'"

Working closely with women and families who are going through a very vulnerable time in their lives can be challenging for the doulas as well. In order to prevent burnout, they said they try to remove the emotion from their job and lean on each other for support.

The doulas also want to continue to be advocates for better access to healthcare. Because of the importance of post-birth check-ups and the baby's first doctor's visit, they are encouraging providers to offer house calls to make it easier for mothers and newborns to receive care.

Claymore added that it would be nice to see healthcare spaces be more open to Indigenous traditions. She shared that she and other Mní Wičóni staff have had to advocate for their community after hearing stories of prejudice. "Healthcare is individualized and should be flexible and culturally appropriate to different identities. In our state that's predominantly white, we need to be able to accommodate families with diverse backgrounds or other socioeconomic levels," Claymore said.

The doulas also expressed their desire to serve more people. Currently based in Bismarck, Evinger said that the cost of gas and transportation forces her to raise her prices for rural families, putting it out of their price range. That distance though is what often makes it more difficult for those families to access prenatal and postnatal care in the first place.

On a larger scale, Evinger added that Bismarck Doula Community would love to continue working with state and local policymakers to make more advancements in health and mental healthcare while keeping mothers in mind. "When women get the support that they need, their families thrive. So, I look at it as when mothers thrive, their communities thrive," Wanner explained.

5 Recommendations

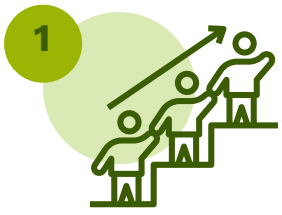
for Improving and Expanding Community Health Work in North Dakota

Community health workers have an important role to play in the health and well-being of communities across North Dakota. As community health work programs continue to expand and scale up across the state, here are five things worth considering when launching or building a program:

1. Hire People with Lived Experience
2. Think Beyond the Walls of a Doctor's Office
3. Raise Up Workers By Increasing Funding
4. Look For Ongoing Training Opportunities
5. Support Your Employees to Support Your People

5 Recommendations

for Improving and Expanding Community Health Work in North Dakota

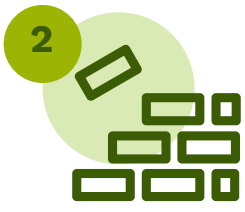


Hire People with Lived Experience

Building and maintaining trust is a critical but often overlooked factor when it comes to delivering healthcare services. One of the super strengths of community health workers is that they often come from the communities they serve, bringing along a wealth of local information, pre-existing relationships, and an ability to connect and communicate in a relatable way. For communities that experience racism, discrimination, or exclusion from the U.S. healthcare system, community health workers can help bridge that gap.

Ministry on the Margins shows what is possible with their Second Chance hires, or people who have previously been convicted of a crime. As they work with people experiencing homelessness, those struggling with addiction, and prison reentry, hiring people who know just what those people are going through allows better insights on how to help in the most effective ways.

Doulas from organizations like Bismarck Doula Community and Mní Wičóni Health Circle also bring their lived experiences as many of them are mothers themselves. Evinger was inspired to become a doula after she hired a postpartum doula for her child. Often having gone through childbirth and postpartum themselves, doulas know the best ways to establish trust with mothers and can ensure that they feel supported throughout the process.



Think Beyond the Walls of a Doctor's Office

Health is much more than visiting the doctor or clinic. For those living in rural areas, visiting a doctor's office or hospital can be even harder as they often live miles away from the nearest one. Community health workers can help meet people where they are, and sometimes that means bringing healthcare conversations and services to unexpected places.

Shackle Free is a nonprofit organization in North Carolina that educates barbers, hair stylists, and beauticians so that they can relay health information to their customers, which became even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic. While you may only visit your doctor once a year, Shackle Free's founder and CEO Chiquitta Lesene says that people may visit their barber 20 times a year. For those who have a regular barber, they build up that trust with that person, telling them about their lives and even relaying important news to their barber before their families, such as cancer diagnoses or depression symptoms.

By training these trusted members of the community, more people can gain access to resources through the help of their barber, beautician, or even tattoo artist. Shackle Free also equipped their shops with binders or digital kiosks with information on a variety of topics, such as cancer, diabetes, hypertension, COVID-19, domestic violence, and homelessness.

Meanwhile, doulas are taking their care straight to their clients' homes. Postpartum doulas spend several hours a week at the homes of the families they work with, helping them with anything they need. Wanner explained that she also just sits down with the mother to make sure she is doing well mentally and offers advice and tips on tasks such as breastfeeding and swaddling.

Raise Up Workers By Increasing Funding

Community health workers provide invaluable services to their community and should be compensated accordingly. If community health workers are unable to make living wages, eventually, the drive and passion for the job may run out, and they may be forced to look for a job elsewhere.

Increased support and funding will also enable these programs to invest more in their community and boost the services provided. Kary explained that Sacred Pipe Resource Center has desires to expand Medicine Stone even more and that they want to get more involved in protecting their community's housing rights. Increasing funding would allow organizations like Sacred Pipe Resource Center to devote more attention to their projects without worrying about financial instability, and possibly even take on more hires to help with new projects.

Look For Ongoing Training Opportunities

Community health workers deserve to be set up for success, which means being thoughtful about what types of upfront training are needed along with ongoing educational opportunities. At Ministry on the Margins, employees and volunteers are trained every few weeks on how to administer Narcan. Additionally, they also have regular visits from police who educate them on the types of drugs they're seeing on the streets and their side effects, as well as crisis intervention training.

These ongoing sessions allow community health workers to feel even more confident in their skills. After meeting with the crisis intervention specialists, Doll said that workers have been able to use those skills to better handle situations that require de-escalation. Even training for situations that may not be as tense as Doll's can still be helpful to employees and volunteers.

Support Your Employees to Support Your People

Many people who work as community health workers do so because they are passionate about improving the health of people in their community. However, these jobs can take an emotional toll – from experiencing secondary trauma to compassion fatigue – and ultimately lead to burnout and staff turnover. It's critical that organizations ensure that community health workers have the support and mental health care they need.

Transparency and honesty are two things that workers at Sacred Pipe say help them foster a supportive work environment. They also try to echo their open atmosphere with the participants at Sacred Pipe and make everyone feel safe to share their thoughts and feelings, which Schily said has greatly improved her mental health. By creating an environment where workers feel safe to express their thoughts and share their emotions, they aim to avoid burnout, and are able to continue that listening space to participants.

While the doulas each work independently business-wise, they all come together to help foster support and love in the community, which extends to each other. Working as a doula can be very emotionally draining, but each doula said that they can turn to each other for support. Martin explained that they often have shared experiences or have gone through similar scenarios, so other doulas can offer a unique understanding that their friends or family may not be able to.

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