Benefits and Challenges of Employing Community Based Workers

Well-designed Community Based Worker (CBW) programs include clearly defined job roles and expectations, careful recruitment, appropriate training, and consistent and ongoing support and supervision.

Who are Community Based Workers?
A CBW is a community member who is employed or contracted to provide a link between the program and the community and/or undertake specific non clinical work.

The value of Community Based Workers
Research demonstrates that CBWs can play an important role in promoting health, preventing disease and improving health outcomes, in both developing and developed countries, especially where health inequalities exist. CBWs can improve access to and coverage of communities with basic health services, can undertake actions that lead to improved health outcomes and can make a valuable contribution to community development.

Benefits and Challenges
Acknowledge from the outset that there are both benefits and challenges when working with Community Based Workers.

From the international literature...
Across a range of international programs, there is consensus in the literature on the following issues:

- CBWs can improve access to and coverage of communities with basic health services, can undertake actions that lead to improved health outcomes and can make a valuable contribution to community development.

- For CBWs to be effective, they must be carefully selected, appropriately trained and – very important – adequately and continuously supported.

- CBW programs are neither a panacea for a weak health system nor a cheap option to provide access to health care for underserved populations. Programs have failed because of unrealistic expectations, poor planning and lack of effort required to make them work.

- CBW programs are vulnerable as they are on the ‘organisational periphery’ of the mainstream health system and lack the capacity to advocate for themselves, though they can thrive in ‘mobilised communities’.
From practice in Northern Australia…

Benefits of employing CBWs

Program staff working in Northern Australia reported a number of key benefits of employing CBWs:

- CBWs increase non Aboriginal staff members’ understanding of the community and its diversity by bringing their cultural knowledge, their local knowledge of community dynamics and their experiences to the program.

- As trusted members of the community, CBWs facilitate engagement of other community members with the program through their access to families and friends and by encouraging their participation.

- CBWs provide language and interpretation skills that are important for communicating information about the program to community members.

- Employing CBWs builds local knowledge and skills in the program areas and increases the potential for program sustainability.

- Overall, CBWs contribute to improved program outcomes by increasing cultural safety and strengthening implementation.

Challenges of employing CBWs

Program staff identified some major challenges to employing CBWs. Some of these challenges are related to how employing bodies are organised, some to social factors operating within Aboriginal communities and some to geography and available resources. All need to be considered when planning a community based strategy employing CBWs.

Making organisational systems more responsive, flexible and supportive

- There is a lack of valuing of CBWs’ skills; lack of permanent positions for CBWs; delays in recruiting and payment; unworkable administrative systems; CBWs have less access to systems and resources than other staff

Finding the right people for the job and keeping them

- Available people may lack the English language, literacy and numeracy skills required; may not hold a driver’s licence, may not be able to approach certain people, may be engaged in pre-existing conflicts and avoidance relationships, may have demonstrated dishonest behaviour in previous positions so not trusted; may lose enthusiasm for the job for various reasons or may find it too difficult to work independently

Being able to train and support CBWs to undertake the required job

- Effective training and support requires a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities and a good understanding of CBWs current knowledge and skills. There needs to be adequate resources to bring CBWs together for training and time to meaningfully work with them so they feel valued and have ownership and responsibility for the program

Being able to provide adequate supervision and support for CBWs to undertake the required job

- There may be a lack of understanding by community based staff about the roles and obligations of the CBWs and unwillingness to work with or support CBWs; lack of day-to-day support for activities such as keeping track of time worked, administrative requirements and clarifying points in relation to the program

Managing cultural and family obligations of CBWs with program constraints and deadlines

- Family and cultural obligations are a priority; family issues such as funerals, criminal proceedings and poor health may intervene and conflict with work responsibilities and timelines

Managing logistical issues such as remoteness and lack of resources

- It is difficult to travel regularly to support CBWs because of distance and lack of resources for items such as vehicles and funds for bringing CBWs together for training and support

Commentary from project managers

It is far more sustainable to invest in CBWs than investing in visiting staff or people from elsewhere who come and go taking program knowledge away.

Community knowledge, family knowledge and how each relates to the other are vital for a safe and comprehensive primary health care service to be delivered.
Making CBW programs work

Key actions to lay the foundation for success in programs employing CBWs are:

- Have a clear and achievable program plan in place, backed up by resources, training, support and time to achieve expected outcomes
- Ensure roles and responsibilities of the position are clear and understood by the community, the team and the CBWs
- Employ CBWs that have the confidence and trust of community members. Have patience in filling the positions to ensure the ‘right’ people are employed
- Ensure good support and supervision mechanisms are in place so identified challenges are managed or overcome and CBWs can achieve their required outcomes
- Provide incentives above pay such as training and travel opportunities to engage and retain CBWs long term
- Build a supportive team environment to meaningfully engage and utilise the skills of the CBWs

Three critical factors for successful CBW programs

1. Supportive and appropriate local supervision
2. Cross-cultural awareness of supervisors and trainers, with patience and ability to work with communication barriers
3. Flexibility associated with cultural obligations

Recommended Resource: