

## Promising Practices

# Promotores de salud: Partners in passing policy change



*Through their Health Equity in Prevention (HEiP) initiative, the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross) awarded contracts to 13 organizations working to implement policy, system, and environmental changes to support health and advance health equity. The Promising Practices series highlights successful strategies used by these organizations and important lessons learned that can be used by other organizations to inform their work. The series also serves as a reference for other funders interested in supporting effective strategies to promote health.*

Community health workers (CHWs) are health professionals who help connect residents with health care services, provide residents with information that increases their knowledge about health, and work as a liaison between patients and health care providers to improve service quality. CHWs can be cultural brokers to their communities and play a key role in helping health care systems be more culturally competent. They can also play an important role in improving the health of residents, particularly those from immigrant and refugee communities.

Comunidades Latinas Unidas en Servicio (CLUES), a culturally specific organization focused on meeting the needs of Latino residents, has hired staff to play a more involved role to support and advocate for residents. Their “promotores de salud” staffing model allowed CLUES to expand their efforts to help local businesses adopt changes that promote health among residents. Promotores have a long history in Latino countries and communities of helping improve the health of residents. While some of their work is similar to that done by CHWs, they play a broader advocacy role and often are not directly connected to a health care system.

### What are promotores de salud?

Characterized by *servicio de corazón* – service from the heart – promotores share a desire to serve their community.... [They] are powerful advocates for individual and community transformation. They share information with community residents about local resources and have the capacity to influence policies related to critical issues facing their communities. The role of the promotores extends far beyond the disease-related functions of community health to a passion for human rights and social justice.

*-From Vision y Compromiso  
(<http://visionycompromiso.org>)*

## Promotores de salud: An expanded community health worker role

Beginning in 2001, CLUES began to hire independent contractors as promotores de salud to advance their health promotion work in the Latino community. Today, CLUES regularly hires promotores in full-time and part-time roles. Although some are certified CHWs, CLUES prioritizes hiring individuals who are trusted liaisons to their communities then provides the training and mentoring opportunities that help the promotores work effectively in their role. As a result, the promotores not only help residents connect to the health care services they need – a more traditional CHW role – but also encourage local businesses and organizations to adopt policies that will improve the health of Latino residents.

## A shift from encouraging individual behavior change to promoting policies that support health

In 2001, CLUES began hiring promotores de salud as independent contractors to help reduce tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke. At that time, promotores met with residents to talk with them about their health concerns and to provide them with relevant resources and educational materials. If residents used tobacco and were interested in quitting, the promotores would help them connect to smoking cessation programs. In the first four years, the promotores completed 5,000 home visits and attended 200 different community events.

In 2004, CLUES expanded its work to bring groups of people together to discuss tobacco-free communities, focusing particularly on tobacco-free policies at soccer tournaments. In 2009, they

partnered with the Association of Nonsmokers – Minnesota (ANSR) to work with the building manager of a multi-unit apartment building with a large number of Latino residents to implement a smoke-free housing policy. Whereas ANSR had the experience to work with building managers to pass an effective policy, CLUES had expertise in building grassroots support for this public health issue. With their deep-rooted connections to the community, promotores were able to provide business owners and residents with important information on smoke-free policies and other ways to improve the health of residents.

Over time, CLUES' partnerships with ANSR, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), Clearway, and Blue Cross, has helped the organization expand their work. In addition to their continued success helping managers of multi-unit apartment buildings pass smoke-free policies, they are also working with local churches and Latino-owned businesses to pass policies that discourage tobacco use. With HEiP funding, CLUES' promotores now also encourage restaurants and other Latino-owned businesses to offer healthier foods and support Latino venues with interest in passing policies that encourage physical activity.

During the past two years, CLUES' promotores have contributed to a number of policy changes that support healthy behavior:

- Smoke-free policies have been passed in 52 multi-unit housing complexes, churches, child care establishments, and other businesses
- Healthy eating policies have been implemented in 21 restaurants, workplaces, and other sites
- Policies that encourage active living and physical activity have been passed by 17 businesses, schools, and churches

## Challenges using promotores to encourage policy change

CLUES prioritizes hiring promotores who are strong liaisons to their community and who can work effectively with Spanish-speaking residents. Computer skills, for example, may be helpful to the position but are less critical for success. CLUES feels strongly that the best promotores are those who are well-established in the community.

Promotores experience challenges in their work when they encounter building managers or business owners who use tobacco or are otherwise uninterested in adopting policies to promote health. CLUES' program manager noted that because all promotores are so invested in their work and their communities, it can be hard to find the right balance between pushing business owners to consider changes in policy and simply letting go when they meet resistance.

*Sometimes you just have to understand that it may not happen and just be willing to move on to another building that might be interested in policy change. When that occurs, we don't force it.*

Promotores must also accommodate the schedule and availability of business owners and community residents. They need to work within the limited availability of these local business people to find times to meet, including times that fall outside of standard workday hours.

## Creating a sustainable model

CLUES uses a braided funding stream to support the work of promotores. They can seek insurance reimbursement for individuals who are certified CHWs and who are working in more traditional ways, such as helping residents enroll in MNsure,

the state's health insurance exchange. However, approximately 80 percent of the funding for current promotores comes through grant funding. To ensure sustainability, CLUES has tried to broaden their content focus to support staff positions with multiple funding sources.

CLUES feels this model can be an effective approach for working with a number of different communities, particularly residents who speak languages other than English and who may otherwise feel disconnected from more mainstream health care organizations. Through their partnerships with ANSR and MDH, CLUES has developed tools and resources that can be shared with other organizations. According to the program manager, they've already shared these materials with a number of Asian American organizations interested in doing similar work.

## Lessons learned

**Flexibility supports success.** CLUES has found that creating flexible part-time positions has helped promotores stay connected to their community and be more successful in their role. The program manager noted that the relationships that the promotores have to the community through other part-time jobs, volunteering, and involvement in their child's school or family's place of faith provide places to form trust and informally share public health messages. Also, because promotores work in the community they are able to meet business owners and community residents at the places that are most comfortable for them.

**Comfort engaging in policy-focused work requires support.** The program manager noted that the CHWs who work as promotores and were trained under a more traditional medical model were initially hesitant to work on policies to support health. CLUES has found that including role playing, opportunities for shadowing, and ongoing mentoring helps promotores feel confident in their work. They have found that managers who supervise promotores need to provide mentorship in the community, not just through office meetings and trainings.

**Businesses can become partners in encouraging policy change.** CLUES was surprised and pleased to see some examples of local businesses encouraging one another to adopt smoke-free policies. They are able to share their experiences with other business owners, share any economic impacts to their business, and respond to concerns that other businesses might have when adopting a smoke-free policy. The program manager noted that they are seeing “stakeholders become public health advocates in their local business community.”

**Involvement in decision making may be an important next step.** CLUES has seen the influence that promotores have at both individual

and community level change. They are interested in building the capacity of their staff to serve on a range of decision-making groups, such as organizational boards, local commissions, and local advisory committees.

## Final thoughts

**CLUES has found that promotores de salud have been critical to the success of their work.** They act as a bridge to the community, which helps CLUES ensure that their efforts are truly meeting the needs of Latino residents. As community advocates, they are also able to encourage business owners and other decision-makers to adopt policies that support the health of residents. Promotodores de salud have a long history in Latino countries, but the model may be applicable to other cultural communities who place high value on relationships and who are not typically engaged through western health care and public health systems.

## For more information

To learn more about CHWs, see the Minnesota Community Health Worker Alliance website: <http://mnchwalliance.org/>

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