

Around the World

The Role of Community Health Worker in Dementia Care: Experience from South Texas in the U.S.

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Highlights

1. Community health workers (CHWs), especially women, serve as trusted liaisons between healthcare systems and underserved populations by providing education, screening, caregiver support, and connections to resources. Their work is shaped by cultural and regional contexts.
2. Promotoras de Salud in Latino communities—culturally and linguistically matched CHWs—have been highly effective in raising dementia awareness, correcting misconceptions, fostering early detection, and building trust. Pilot programs in California and South Texas show measurable improvements in knowledge, outreach, and access to care.
3. In regions such as South Texas in the U.S. with disproportionately high dementia prevalence among Hispanics, CHW and promotora programs have expanded services significantly. Examples include a 229% increase in home visits and an 11% reduction in inpatient admissions, alongside training initiatives like Project ECHO Brain Health that strengthen CHW capacity to support families and advocate for inclusion in dementia research.

Background

Community health workers (CHWs) are frontline public health providers who serve as trusted members of the communities they work in. Their close ties allow them to bridge gaps between formal healthcare systems and underserved populations by improving access, providing culturally and linguistically appropriate education, and enhancing trust. In dementia care, CHWs often assume roles in outreach, caregiver support, and early detection (Alam et al., 2021; Garza, 2020; Askari et al., 2018).

The scoping review by Alam et al. (2021) included 10 eligible studies in understanding the role of CHW in dementia care around the world. They discovered that community health workers (CHWs) involved in dementia care were predominantly women, with reported proportions reaching as high as 95% or even 100% in several studies. Their educational backgrounds ranged from secondary school to college degrees, and in some cases included years of experience in related fields. They were engaged either as paid employees of government programs, private organizations, or research projects, while

in other cases they volunteered through community-based organizations. These CHWs underwent structured dementia-related training, which varied in duration and format—from short introductory sessions to months-long programs with workshops, supervised practice, and interactive activities. Alam et al. also concluded that CHWs fulfill five core roles in dementia care: (a) education and building awareness on dementia, (b) screening for dementia, (c) screening for HIV-associated dementia, (d) assisting patients in utilizing healthcare facilities and other resources, and (e) providing services for dementia caregivers.

While these roles are evident globally, their implementation often varies by cultural and regional context. In the United States, for example, Latino communities have adopted a culturally specific model through *promotoras de salud*. The *Promotoras de Salud* (“health promoters”) are typically Latina women and deliver health education and prevention programs within their own communities. Because they share language, culture, and lived experiences with participants, promotoras build trust and enhance the acceptability of interventions. This approach is especially effective in engaging Hispanic/Latino populations, who are often underrepresented in clinical research (Shaw et al., 2022).

One example of this model in practice comes from East Palo Alto, California, where a pilot program demonstrated how promotoras trained through a community-based participatory research model significantly increased their knowledge of dementia and then shared this knowledge within their neighborhoods. Twenty promotoras who are primarily women with strong community ties were trained using culturally and linguistically tailored materials that included manuals, videos, and practice with dementia screening tools such as the Mini-Cog. Pre- and post-training assessments showed significant gains in their understanding of dementia, and follow-up surveys revealed that each promotora reached between 15 to 25 community members with information on Alzheimer’s disease, early signs of memory loss, and available healthcare resources. This initiative highlighted the effectiveness of promotoras not only in raising awareness but also in reducing misconceptions that dementia is part of “normal aging,” thereby fostering early detection and support-seeking in Latino populations (Askari et al., 2018).

Applications in south Texas

Similar promotora efforts have also emerged in South Texas, where the burden of dementia among Hispanic populations is particularly severe. South Texas, particularly the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) and rural West Texas, carries a disproportionately high burden of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease (AD). Hispanics in these regions face both higher prevalence rates and earlier symptom onset compared to non-Hispanic Whites (Garza et al., 2020). For example, dementia prevalence in LRGV counties is markedly higher than the state and national averages: Starr County (20.7%), Hidalgo County (19%), Willacy County (17.7%), and Cameron County (15.7%), compared to 13% in Texas and 11.4% nationally among Medicare

beneficiaries (Garza et al., 2020). Moreover, Hispanic adults often experience AD symptoms nearly seven years earlier (mean onset at 67.6 years vs. 73.1 years in non-Hispanic Whites)(Garza et al., 2020). In addition, they face significant barriers to dementia care, as they often encounter challenges in finding appropriate healthcare services and experience high uninsured rates that limit their ability to afford necessary treatment, thereby contributing to chronic disease and cognitive decline (Sheladia & Reddy, 2021).

To address these disparities, community health worker, (CHW) and promotores programs have been developed to build trust and extend dementia-related services in underserved areas. At the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Promotores programs has been developed to build community trust and engagement for research studies on Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. These community health workers screen for cognitive issues using tools like the Mini-Cog to identify older adults with cognitive performance changes. They also make home visits to detect potential health issues and identify needed services. They also provide crucial education about dementia, AD, and related brain disorders to Hispanic communities while recruiting research participants for studies on neurocognitive disorders (Garza, 2020). Patel et al. (2023) demonstrated the measurable impact of service delivery through these efforts. Integrating promotoras into dementia care teams increased home visits to underserved patients by 229% and reduced inpatient admissions by 11%, underscoring their value in expanding access and preventing crises.

Beyond direct service delivery, more recent initiatives in South Texas have emphasized building CHW capacity through education and training. Masoud et al. (2024) evaluated the Project ECHO Brain Health program, an eight-week training designed for CHWs serving Latinx communities. The study found significant improvements in CHWs' self-efficacy to recognize dementia, support family caregivers, and advocate for Latinx inclusion in research. By equipping CHWs with enhanced knowledge and confidence, this program illustrates the potential of capacity-building models to strengthen the dementia care infrastructure in regions where formal healthcare systems remain under-resourced.

For Further Readings

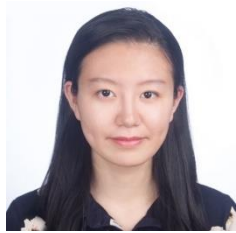
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