

Community Health Workers in Pediatric Primary Care Settings

Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships in the first years of a child's life are necessities for lifelong health and development. Challenges to caregiver wellbeing alongside structural inequities such as poverty, housing instability, and food insecurity, threaten foundational early childhood relationships. Communities that are disproportionately impacted by these inequities, including families of color and those whose primary language is not English, also experience poor access to health care, and often lower-quality care. Simultaneously, Washington state's children and youth continue to face a mental health crisis. Despite over half (58%) of Washington teens experiencing anxiety and/or depression, and 10% of middle and high school students attempted suicide in the last year (Children's Alliance, 2023; HCA, 2022), **64% of Washington youth with behavioral health needs are not receiving any care.**

The Response: Community Health Workers in Pediatric Primary Care Settings

Community Health Workers (CHWs) are frontline public health workers who are a part of the community being served. A trusting relationship is at the core of the CHW role, allowing them to reduce barriers to high-quality care by serving as a bridge between families, health systems, and other social supports. In pediatric primary care, CHWs play an integral role by:

1. facilitating timely access to mental health care
2. addressing families' health-related social needs and resources, and
3. enhancing the quality and cultural competency of care.

The Ask: Sustainable Apple Health Funding for Pediatric CHWs and Care Coordination

- 1.) **Continue Pediatric Community Health Workers** for behavioral health for 2 years (HCA grant-funded program.) Supplemental session, approximately \$2.15m GF-S.
- 2.) Apply to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to establish a sustainable billing mechanism for CHWs in primary care, under the supervision of a health care provider, to draw down federal match to sustain and spread this workforce it beyond the grant-funded clinics.
- 3.) **Establish sustainable funding for screening reimbursement** on Apple Health for Kids so that when a need is identified, help is delivered \$2.5m GF-S.
 - o Increase Apple Health for Kids reimbursement for performing mental health screens to ensure adequate referral and follow-up can occur.
 - o Apply to CMS to utilize a newly established billing mechanism for health care providers to assess and support health related social needs.

Background:

The Washington State Legislature invested in the Pediatric CHW workforce through a [2-year grant program](#) beginning in January 2023. The 30 funded clinics (including 7 tribal clinics) have already seen significant impacts in their ability to address the health-related social needs of children ages 0-18 and their families, help kids access behavioral health services, and build trusting, collaborative relationships with families. Recent research also found that incorporating CHWs in primary care improved children's receipt of preventive care services, further demonstrating the importance of the CHW role in closing healthcare access gaps and achieving health equity ([Coker et al., 2023](#)).

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