



Community Health Workers: Fighting Food Insecurity and Health Inequities from Within



NATIONAL
HEALTH
FOUNDATION

www.nationalhealthfoundation.org

October 2021

Introduction

Minority communities face multiple barriers when accessing social services and quality health care — making it difficult for them to build healthy lives. Not only does this population tend to be burdened disproportionately by chronic disease, but they also experience cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic barriers to vital health care and knowledge. Research shows that Community Health Workers (or Promotores de Salud) are highly effective in bridging the gaps between community members and health and social services.

Recognizing CHWs as agents of change in their communities, National Health Foundation (NHF) has integrated and expanded this framework as an essential response to the localized health challenges of communities throughout Los Angeles County. NHF's Community Health Workers are centered as the foundation of improving food insecurity outcomes for under-resourced communities, and more recently, conducting COVID-19 outreach and increasing vaccine access.

This brief explores NHF's CHW model and its impacts for improving food security. Second, it highlights the role of CHWs in bringing meaningful inclusion and community perspective to activate public health solutions. For instance, CHWs were instrumental in promoting community awareness and engagement in public health measures during COVID-19, while connecting them to social services and resources beyond CalFresh. This brief uses the terms CHW and Promotoras interchangeably.



NHF Promotoras Fortina (left) and Gilda (right) share CalFresh information with the community.

Defining Community Health Worker / Promotores de Salud

Promotores come from and are a part of the communities that they serve.

They share a common language, culture, values, and have knowledge of their community resources. They understand, and often experience, the existing health challenges in their neighborhoods. Their ability to build strong relationships with their community allows them to help others navigate a health care system that has traditionally excluded them. Through culturally relevant education, prevention programs, counseling, and case-management, CHWs improve health outcomes for their communities.

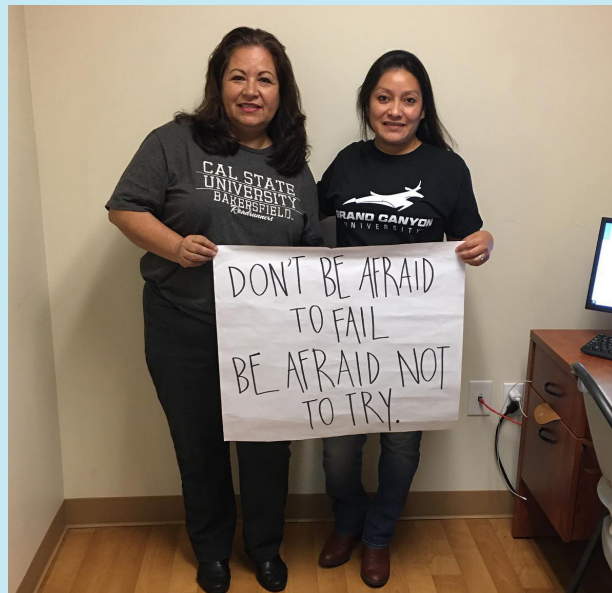
Gilda's Story

Today, you might find Gilda Sion emceeding an NHF community event where she introduces performers, speakers, and leads a raffle game for hundreds of her neighbors. But she wasn't always the confident, outspoken community leader many of her colleagues know her to be. Once, she described herself as a shy teenager and young mother. Originally from Guatemala, Gilda immigrated with her family to Los Angeles in search of a better life.

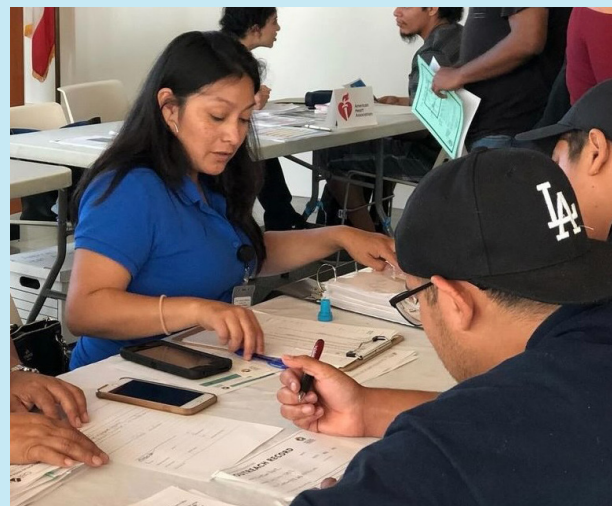
Life wasn't easy, she says, but she was determined to build her confidence and support her children. These attributes led her to organizations that helped at-risk, low-income families, where she began to share her experiences with food insecurity and limited access to resources. Little by little, Gilda started to come out of her shell. She learned English, became more knowledgeable about resources in the community, and quickly became a role-model for others. Eventually, she would interact with Promotores de Salud at her son's elementary school. It was then that she found her calling as a Promotora.

Drawing on her 16 years of experience, Gilda is a core member of NHF's Promotora team in its Community Initiatives department where she connects individuals and families to vital food benefits, nutrition education, and other social services. Using her knowledge, experience and connection to the community, she helps families navigate the health care system and access benefits and health education so they can build healthier lives.

"What I enjoy most about being a Promotora is that I know that I can make a difference in the lives of others," said Gilda. "I've always been eager to learn, and I realized that I also like to teach my community about different topics. I know that my purpose is to share information in the simplest way so that anyone can access it."



NHF Promotoras Gilda (right) and Fortina (left) in support of college application season.



Gilda provides CalFresh enrollment information to college students.

NHF's Model

NHF's Community Initiatives department includes a team of CHWs that collaborate altogether on food insecurity work, community activism and engagement, and support related to the COVID-19 pandemic. NHF has found that the model is most effective when Promotoras are members of the target population, not just people who speak the same language or share characteristics with the communities they serve. Therefore, all current NHF Promotoras are recruited from the community they are primarily serving and are bilingual Spanish speakers. The following strategies are at the foundation of NHF's CHW framework:



Enrolling Individuals and Families in CalFresh Food Benefits

Through a partnership with the [Department of Public Social Services](#) and the [California Association of Food Banks](#), NHF Promotoras provide direct enrollment assistance to the CalFresh food benefits program. During the COVID-19 pandemic, NHF Promotoras were flooded with calls from families who were experiencing heightened levels of food insecurity. As the first line of defense, NHF Promotoras catered their efforts to the needs of the community, leaning on their skills as nimble, community-grounded, and well-connected health advocates. Meeting the community where they are, NHF Promotoras conducted COVID-safe community outreach and education about CalFresh benefits through group presentations and at community events throughout Los Angeles. Community members were able to call NHF Promotoras to receive assistance with the CalFresh application and to learn about helpful resources beyond CalFresh.

Connecting Families to Vital Food Assistance During A Pandemic

NHF Promotora, Fortina, had enrolled community member, Eliza, in CalFresh food benefits earlier in the year. Eliza reached out to Fortina for assistance when she was struggling to find work and support her family during the COVID-19 pandemic. During her six-month check-in, Eliza shared that she had been amazed at how much the CalFresh program has helped her family. During the call, Fortina discussed the full extent of Eliza's benefits now that she had an EBT card, including two local programs: a market match program at a Farmers Market near her home, and the Mas Fresco program at a nearby Northgate Market.



Both programs would allow Eliza to double the amount of CalFresh benefits she spends at both locations. Eliza expressed her gratitude to Fortina and was so excited to participate in the new programs. She also shared that Fortina's support has made it a little easier to get through the pandemic, and that she has increased the number of fresh fruits and vegetables she ate at home with her family.

NHF's Model



Supporting Individuals and Families in Maximizing their Benefits through CalFresh Healthy Living

With funding support from the [Los Angeles County Department of Public Health](#), NHF's CalFresh Healthy Living program improves the nutritional health of low-income community residents. In this program, Promotoras support and lead nutrition education and physical activity classes that focus on healthy eating, exercise, food resource management, and ways to stretch food dollars on a budget. Activities include cardio-dance classes, tabling activities and games, and in-person and virtual nutrition classes. In addition, NHF Promotoras engage community members online in healthy living resources, including food demos, recipes, exercise tips and more in a Facebook Group called NHF Familias Saludables/NHF Healthy Families.

Ensuring Individuals and Families Maintain their Benefits Over the Long Term

CHWs not only help individuals and families access food benefits, but they often provide individualized case management to ensure those families maximize their benefits and re-apply year over year. CHW's case management services not only address food insecurity issues, but help families tackle other barriers to health and wellness.



Connecting Individuals and Families to Social Services Beyond CalFresh

In times of crisis and where language, culture, or immigration status are a barrier to more formal forms of aid, CHWs play an essential role distributing quick and reliable information and resources. In response to COVID-19 and newly available vaccines, NHF Promotoras dispersed vaccine information to the households they were assisting with CalFresh benefits. Additionally, they were able to reach new community members by attending vaccine outreach events and promoting public health information. CHWs also connect community members to resources beyond CalFresh and COVID-19, including rent relief, grieving services, Medi-Cal application assistance and services, unemployment support and more. During economic and health crises, community members can rely on the knowledge and assistance of Promotoras.

Fortina and Alma's Stories

Fortina's Story

"I immigrated to Los Angeles with my family over 20 years ago. Since then, I have committed myself to serving my community.

I've had the pleasure of being a part of NHF since 2019. I love our mission and I share its values of service, support, and respect. As a Promotora, I offer resources that meet the needs of my community. I am passionate about providing educational opportunities and tools that can help families strengthen their future.

I feel energized by my community and their desire to discover new opportunities and resources."



Alma's Story



"I've lived in Los Angeles for 26 years after emmigrating from Mexico. My work as a Promotora began 14 years ago. After becoming a Promotora I fell in love with the work and serving my community. I realized that I could make a difference if I shared valuable information that could help others. My job is very rewarding personally and professionally."



Evidence of Impact

Moving the Needle on Food Equity

NHF uses multiple evaluation tools and methods to measure the impact of its food security work as well as its CHW framework. Personal success stories and messages of gratitude serve as qualitative data. Additionally, NHF uses a **Hunger Vital Sign Survey** to assess the impact of its CalFresh outreach, enrollment and case management on an individual's food security level. Research shows that the Hunger Vital Sign survey could identify households with very low- to high-levels of food security with 95% accuracy.

NHF CalFresh Promotoras use the Hunger Vital Sign survey to evaluate their impact on a household's food security starting with their initial contact, and again at a 6-month check in and 1-year check in. The results have been astounding.

On average, a household's initial score on the Hunger Vital Sign is **1.64 out of 2**, indicating very low food security or experiencing food insecurity. Within six months NHF sees the average score of households assisted and monitored by Promotoras drop to a **.37 out of 2**; nearly full food security.

Not only does this speak to the importance of CalFresh and other food access programs, but it shows that Promotoras and CHWs can often have a very quick impact on the economic and physical health of the households and communities they work with.

Hunger Vital Sign Survey



Score During 6-month Check-in with Promotora



Below are a few key metrics that highlight the scope and reach of Promotora's food security work with the community. So far this year, NHF Promotoras:

- **Directly assisted 190 in submitting their CalFresh food benefits application.**
- **Enrolled and case managed 64 households in CalFresh. This generated \$107,100 for Los Angeles households and \$182,070 into the local economy.**
- **Provided 185 referrals or application assistance to local food access programs.**
- **Provided CalFresh information to 2,100 community members.**



“DPSS denied my CalFresh application, but Fortina’s consistent follow-up gave me the chance to apply again. Finally, my case was approved, so we are no longer hungry at home.”

- Silvia, CalFresh recipient

Improved Health Outcomes

For communities impacted by chronic health conditions, NHF Promotoras meet residents where they are by providing culturally relevant nutrition and exercise classes in public parks and community events with short and long-term impacts on their overall health.

Despite the pandemic in 2020, NHF Promotoras conducted:

- **100 nutrition education and physical activity classes.**
- **12 food demonstration events.**
- **Assisted with 5 large food distribution events reaching approximately 6,000 people.**

Providing Outreach and Support During a Pandemic

NHF’s CHW model allows for knowledgeable health advocates to directly respond to community needs with equity and empathy, thereby reducing the negative health impacts of COVID-19 in under-served communities.

As COVID-19 vaccines became readily available, NHF Promotoras were seen as trusted community experts, sharing factual COVID-19 information and assisting individuals in scheduling free transportation to vaccine sites, health fairs, and clinics. To date, NHF Promotoras assisted **120** individuals with scheduling their vaccine appointments through California’s Prep-Mod system. In addition, Promotoras promoted events across Los Angeles that reached and assisted over **400** people with getting vaccinated. Finally, Promotoras provided vaccine educational material to over **600** hard-to-reach community members throughout Los Angeles County.

Conclusion

For decades, Community Health Workers' key attributes, perspectives, and community connections have allowed them to build quality relationships with their neighbors; sharing information and local resources, and creating opportunities for civic participation. Their deep community ties and flexibility allow them to address and advocate for the unique health needs of residents.

This brief outlined National Health Foundation's successes in implementing the CHW model to tackle the health-related social needs and social determinants of health as they exist at the community level. During 2020, NHF Promotoras were able to quickly adapt and scale their efforts with a focus on those experiencing food insecurity during the pandemic. Promotoras were able to move the needle on food equity for many of the individuals they case managed, ensuring they had access to affordable, nutritious food while infusing thousands of dollars into the local economy. In addition, NHF Promotoras served as a critical link to health and social services for community members during COVID-19. Finally, their role as health educators and advocates continues to improve health outcomes for whole communities.

Today, there are unique opportunities to continue supporting Promotoras to achieve public health goals. It is critical that policymakers and health care organizations value and raise up CHWs so that they can continue to play an essential role in their communities.

Acknowledgements

National Health Foundation is especially thankful to its partners for their ongoing support.





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