



Task Shifting: Community Health Officers in Ghana

Context

Community health centers have had limited impact on health care priorities in the most deprived and geographically large rural districts of Ghana. Access to services is constrained by the distance of the facilities to much of the population they are designated to serve. Moreover, the availability of skilled staff is limited—as in many other countries, it is difficult to recruit health professionals to work in these rural, remote locations.

The Practice

Ghana's Community-Based Health Planning and Services (CHPS) initiative is an innovative approach that shifts staff from low-impact static health centers with limited outreach to high-impact mobile community-supported services. The approach relies on community health officers (CHOs), auxiliary nurses who receive two years of training to provide "doorstep" services to underserved rural populations.

The health workforce strategies for this approach include:

- Recruitment of new health workers and reorientation of existing health workers
- Efforts to improve retention
- Recruitment and orientation of two levels of health volunteers, one facility-based and the other community-based.

The key innovations are:

- The Ghana Health Service offers incentives for CHOs such as reduced time to eligibility for promotion, paid additional study and a deprived-area allowance
- Local governments are beginning to contribute resources for CHPS through their district assemblies, sponsoring students for pre-service training and funding construction of community health compounds for CHOs
- Community health volunteers assist CHOs with outreach; village health committees select these volunteers, who play a key role in conducting disease surveillance and identifying persons to whom the CHO may need to pay particular attention
- Village health committees also identify a volunteer nurse aide who helps the CHO maintain the community health compound and receive patients
- The Ghana Ministry of Health has increased the number of pre-service community health nurse training schools from four to ten in the past three years, locating them in each region to encourage local recruitment and increase retention.

Health Workforce Impact

Ghana has deployed more than 310 CHOs in 53 of the country's poorest districts. These nurses have improved access to health care services for nearly one million Ghanaians (each CHO serves an average of 4,500 people), reportedly resulting in substantial improvements in community health.

This summary brief is a component of a larger effort to document and disseminate four promising human resources for health practices from Africa. The brief is excerpted from Health Workforce Innovations: A Synthesis of Four Promising Practices (Buchan and McCaffery). The synthesis paper and a full report on this particular promising practice, Providing Doorstep Services to Underserved Rural Populations: Community Health Officers in Ghana (Acquah, Frelick and Matikanya), are available in the Publications and Resources section at www.capacityproject.org

The Capacity Project Partnership

IntraHealth International, Interchurch Medical Assistance (IMA), JHPIEGO, Liverpool Associates in Tropical Health (LATH), Management Sciences for Health (MSH), PATH, Training Resources Group, Inc. (TRG)