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Community Health Center hosts health worker training

By Almea Chavaroli
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NEW BEDFORD — In the Greater New Bedford Community Health Center's auditorium Tuesday afternoon, words were displayed on a screen about what a community health worker is (advocate, support, case manager) and isn’t (nurse, therapist, doctor).

It was the first time a training for community health workers (CHWs) was held on the South Coast. More than 15 people signed up for 30 hours of instruction for 18 days over the course of three months conducted by Justice Resource Institute.

The role of the CHWs has been a growing profession over the last decade. The position is one that has also evolved from outreach and getting people enrolled in insurance to really helping people understand how to navigate the health system, according to Cheryl Barrett, president and CEO of the downtown community health center.

The number of community health workers at the health center has increased to about 10 over the last couple of years, as it prepared for the MassHealth Accountable Care Organization, or ACO, which began March 1. ACOs are networks of physicians, hospitals, and other community-based health care providers held accountable financially for cost, quality, and member experience.

According to Barrett, between 50 to 60 percent of the health center’s patients are on Medicaid. Those patients have only July 1 to opt out of the ACO.

“The value of this work will only grow over time,” Barrett said of the CHWs. The center has at least six workers to hopefully be certified through the training. Thank you Greater New Bedford Allies for Health and Wellness, Inc., those who live on working in greater New Bedford for 50 percent of the $500 tuition for the program.

“We are very committed to training community health workers because we just think it’s going to make a huge difference,” said Barbara Adson, chair of the Allies for Health and Wellness.

Florence Agbor, at the first training session Tuesday, works in Attleboro for Boston Medical Center. In trying to explain the work she does, she referenced the back of her sweater which read “Advocating for healthier lives, one at a time.”

“The patients are intimidated and doctors don’t have enough time for them,” in many cases, said Agbor who’s from Africa.

CHWs will go above and beyond to find a resource for a patient because it must be done, she said. A big part of the job is developing trust with the patient.

“It feels good to help people,” said Rolande Martial, an intern at United Neighborhoods of Fall River through the Department of Transitional Assistance.

Martial, from Haiti, said she’s dealt with lots of Haitians who don’t speak English and wants to be able to help and advocate for her community to make sure they have access to the resources they need. In the field, workers deal with people of different backgrounds and being educated on how to go about that through the training is very important, she said.

Yasmin Fontanero of Greater Fall River Partners for a Healthier Community said CHWs are like the lifeline of the city connecting people to services.

There is set to be a professional development forum May 13, 3-5 p.m. at the Weslawn Public Library, 56 Montes Road. For more information contact Jamie Berberena at Jamie.Berberena.CHW@gmail.com.
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By Aimee Chiavaroli
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It was the first time training for
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50 Markon Road. For more informa-
tion contact Jamie Bererena at
JamieBererena.CHW@gmail.com.