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Community Health Center hosts health worker training

By Aimee Chiavaroli
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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 SouthCoast. More than 15 people signed up for 80 hours of instruction for 16 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 Bartlett, 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 Bartlett, between 50 to 60 percent of the health center's patients are on Medicaid. Those patients have until July 1 to opt out of the ACO.

"The value of this work will only grow over time," Bartlett said of the CHWs. The center has at least six workers to hopefully be certified through the training.

Thanks to Greater New Bedford Allies for Health and Wellness, Inc., those who live or work in greater New

Bedford got 50 percent off of the \$800 tuition for the program.

"We're very committed to training community health workers because we just think it's going to make a huge difference," said Barbara Acksen, 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 Neighbors of Fall River through the Department of Transitional Assistance.

Martial, from Haiti, said she's dealt with a lot 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.

Yansie Fontanez 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 23, 3:30 to 5 p.m. at the Wareham Public Library, 59 Marion Road. For more information contact Jamie Berberena at JamieBerberena.CHW@gmail.com.

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