

Discovering Potential: A Glimpse of My Journey as a Community Health Worker

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MY NAME is Abdul'Hafeedh bin Abdullah, and I'm from San Bernardino, California. I am a community health worker (CHW) currently employed with Multnomah County Health Departments Community Capacitation Center (CCC) located in Portland, Oregon. I would like to offer a brief glimpse of my journey as a CHW in the field of violence prevention.

In 1995, I was sentenced to 8 years in prison for participating in a gang-related act of violence at the age of 17 years. While incarcerated, a series of events transpired that guided me to take a different path. I credit the blessing of faith, time to reflect on self, thirst for knowledge, and the presence of positive peer support and mentorship as primary reasons for my transformation. I often describe this experience as being trapped in the most violent place in America, yet home to some of the most fascinating minds and loving hearts in the world. I returned home in 2003, renewed in life and ambitious to assist family, friends, and fellow community members with

overcoming challenges similar to what I had faced. My experience with gangs, street, and prison culture formed my understanding that violence and its overwhelming impact on the lives of community members was where I needed to focus.

I moved to Portland, Oregon, in 2008 and enrolled into Portland State University's College of Arts and Science. During this time, I discovered a platform in my faith community that allowed me to engage and support adults and youth in crisis. Portland's Islamic community attracts members from all around the globe, many who have emigrated from war-torn and unstable regions of the world. The transition for these families into American society is difficult, and I had the pleasure of assisting these families with navigating obstacles and overcoming challenges they faced every day. Within a few years I was introduced to the program, Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE), the CHW model, and a public health approach to violence prevention. The CCC is an organization that works to build capacity in communities to identify and solve their own most pressing health issues (Multnomah County Health Department CCC, 2015). The CHW training, development, and advocacy are part of the core strategies of CCC's violence prevention effort through STRYVE. STRYVE was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as 1 of 4 demonstration sites established across the nation in 2011.

STRYVE and community partners adopted 2 best practice strategies as core components of the Comprehensive Youth Violence

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Prevention Plan (Wiggins, & Stavenjord, 2014). Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES) and Crime Prevention through Environmental Design were selected with the intent of synchronizing positive youth development with community-organizing processes that encourages the examination and positive transformation of the built environment (Prevention Research Center of Michigan, 2015). The YES program operates within 4 geographical locations, each site selected on the basis of data identifying these areas as hot spots for gang and criminal activity. Community health workers on the STRYVE team are responsible for cofacilitating YES groups alongside staff selected by community partners. While cofacilitating the YES group in North East Portland's Cully neighborhood (Baltazar Ortiz Community Center), our youth reached the point in the curriculum where participants are given the opportunity to evaluate their community for risk and protective factors. We broke out into groups and performed block-by-block assessments of the area. Youth identified a Gentlemen's Club (strip club) operating on a block-long plot, located directly across the street from Baltazar Ortiz Center, as a primary risk factor to their community. The location received negative press coverage due to ongoing federal investigations and was a magnet for criminal activity and source of attraction for unfamiliar and potentially dangerous personalities in the neighborhood.

The youth added the risk factor to our list of possible projects and brainstormed ways to get it removed from the community. We worked with the youth on advocacy strategies, emphasizing recognition for the quality of their ideas and efforts. Each day we reviewed core components of the program, practiced public speaking, and rehearsed the meanings of key terms and concepts as a source of preparation.

A series of gang-related shootings later that summer sent ripples of concern throughout Portland. One of STRYVE's other YES sites (where most of the shootings occurred) organized a youth-led rally titled "Silence the Violence." This event was able to galvanize the cities' attention, including both the Mayor's Office and Chair of the Mult-

nomah County Commissioners. Youth from our Cully site seized the opportunity and effectively placed their proposal on the radar of the District Commissioner and Mayor's Office. Results included the business/land placed on the market for sale and collaboration among a multisector coalition of community-based organizations, government agencies, and representatives from the YES program working together to purchase the property to utilize the space in a more beneficial way.

As a CHW, I lean on existing relationships, the trust, and bond of shared experience as a source of access to the community. My goal is to encourage community participation and to support the process of community transformation. I also carry the responsibility to inform our team's internal planning and implementation process, utilizing insight acquired through years of lived experience and direct exposure to the reality of the people we serve every day. I bring this same insight to the table, while interfacing with other government agencies and systems working to reduce violence in the community.

My natural progression into the CHW role has effectively formalized and professionalized the unique gifts and skills I have developed and can now bring to the public health profession and my community. Through this process I have been inspired to pursue a Doctor of Public Health (DrPH). With my current skills, community focus, and further graduate education, I will work to build additional community capacity, facilitate community organizing around their identified challenging health concerns, and increase efforts to reduce violence.

The public health approach that we utilize for violence prevention focuses on root causes of violence, uses a participatory process where people most impacted by violence are active participants in the social change process, and are key concerns of the populations most impacted by the violence. We often forget that there are untapped resources, rich knowledge and skills of the people living in the community, available in every sector of the United States. Working together as a team, we have the potential to enhance the quality of life for society as a whole.

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