



COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS IN ONTARIO



WHAT THEY DO,

HOW THEY DO IT, AND

HOW THEY ARE MAKING AN IMPACT



WHY COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS ARE CRITICAL TO THE ONTARIO HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

In short, social determinants of health are the social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors that promote a person's overall health and wellbeing - shaping a person's chances of developing chronic illnesses, accessing care, and their overall life expectancy. For many people, their social determinants of health are hard to reach and they have limited access to the things they need to be well. This is generally because of faulty systems that were not made with these people in mind and that were not built to address their needs. This is especially true in marginalized communities which face historic and ongoing systemic barriers to accessing their social determinants of health.

IF

If the health care system is going to close long-standing gaps in health outcomes, it must confront the challenge of effectively reaching people who have had the least access to their social determinants of health.

THEN

To do this, new and flexible tactics, strategies, models, and roles are required that centre the needs of diverse people - not just the 'typical' or easiest to reach person.



Community Ambassadors are non-clinical, hyperlocal roles that are filled by trusted members of the communities they serve. They work with community members to creatively remove or reduce the barriers they face when accessing and navigating their social determinants of health - acting as a bridge into the health care system.


KEEP READING TO
FIND OUT WHY!



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INTRODUCTION



Image: Health Commons



LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

As Health Commons, we acknowledge the traditional, ancestral, and sacred territories and lands we call home across what is now known as Canada. Health Commons is located in Tkaronto, now known as Toronto, which is on the traditional territory of many Nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, Anishnabeg, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat peoples. Tkaronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands, and is part of Dish With One Spoon Treaty Territory.

We recognize that for many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples, relationship with the land is profoundly important to their sense of self and place. We are grateful for teachings that have been shared with us about how the lands and waters heal and nurture by gifting the languages, songs, stories, ceremonies, and protocol that guide and sustain many First Nation, Inuit, and Métis communities and Nations.

We carry tremendous privilege in being guests on these lands and are serious about our responsibility to understand, reflect on, and then take meaningful action to improve our relationships to these lands and to the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples who continue to host us here. We are committed to doing whatever we can and are invited to do, and to work alongside communities for healing, reparation, and wellbeing of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples and the lands, skies, and waters that surround and nourish us.



Image: Marissa Hill



PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

There are three critical ways you can support scaling the Community Ambassador model:

1. Investing in agencies who employ Community Ambassadors in Ontario
2. Hiring Community Ambassadors within your agency
3. Sharing the word about how important the Community Ambassador model is in Ontario

The purpose of this document is to help you do this by sharing what we know about Community Ambassadors in Ontario. As we describe the role of Community Ambassadors it is important to note four things:

We know Community Ambassadors and similar peer roles exist around the world, and existed in Ontario prior to the pandemic. There is extensive documentation and evidence about the impact of these roles, including as critical mechanisms to mobilizing and improving health outcomes within local communities. We are describing the role of Community Ambassadors within the context of Ontario, to supplement the work that has come before it and that will come after it.

Some Community Ambassadors in Ontario have a mandate that is very specific to COVID-19 while others have a much broader mandate. We are describing the application of this role beyond the pandemic response.

We recognize there are many people who are making the health system better and more equitable. Our hope is to strengthen the case for embedding Community Ambassadors as a critical component of a comprehensive and effective health equity strategy in Ontario.

Community Ambassadors are not giving out or replacing the need for medical advice. They are playing supporting and bridge-building roles and helping to ensure that hyperlocal community needs and priorities are supported within the health care system.

EXPLORING THE ONTARIO COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR MODEL

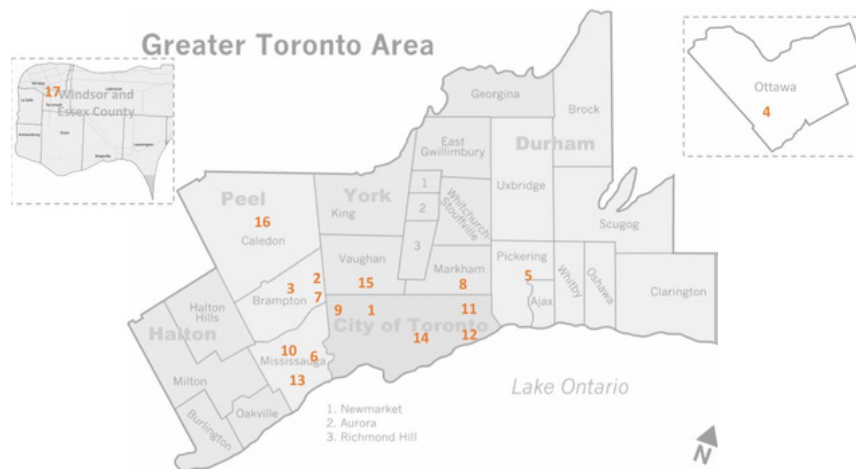


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ABOUT COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS IN ONTARIO

WHERE COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS ARE LOCATED

As part of the [High Priority Communities Strategy](#), in 2020 the provincial government funded agencies in 17 communities in Ontario with high rates of community transmission of COVID-19, racialization, and/or material deprivation (See map below. Note: Community Ambassadors are employed by Lead Agencies other than these ones). The intention of the High Priority Communities Strategy is to implement or expand agencies' local, equity-driven efforts aimed at addressing these issues and closing the gap in access and support for those hardest hit by the pandemic - with Community Ambassadors acting as a critical tool.



- | | | | | | |
|---|---|----|---|----|---|
| 1 | Black Creek Community Health Centre | 7 | Wellfort Community Health Services (Malton) | 13 | Dufferin-Peel Canadian Mental Health Association |
| 2 | Wellfort Community Health Services (Bramalea) | 8 | Carefirst Seniors and Community Association | 14 | Flemingdon Community Health Centre |
| 3 | Punjabi Community Health Services | 9 | Rexdale Community Health Centre | 15 | Vaughan Community Health Centre |
| 4 | South East Ottawa Community Health Centre | 10 | Indus Community Services | 16 | Roots Community Services |
| 5 | Carea Community Health Centre | 11 | TAIBU Community Health Centre | 17 | Windsor and Essex County Canadian Mental Health Association |
| 6 | Dixie-Bloor Neighbourhood Services | 12 | Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities | | |

COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS AND THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Community Ambassadors are situated within the realm of prevention and health maintenance, and do not diagnose or provide clinical care. Community Ambassadors take a health equity approach and work in a way that meets the specific needs of the communities they work with.

No two communities are the same. Many Community Ambassadors have been mandated to provide support that is specific to COVID-19, while others provide a broader scope of support. All Community Ambassadors create access to the distinct social determinants of health each person needs to be well.

Here is how we think about these social determinants of health as it relates to COVID-19. Not everyone is affected equally by the social determinants of health, or by the pandemic. The social determinants of health affect not only who gets sick (pink text), but everyone in the community. The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the impact of these inequalities, particularly for communities who are already under-resourced and experiencing barriers to wellbeing.

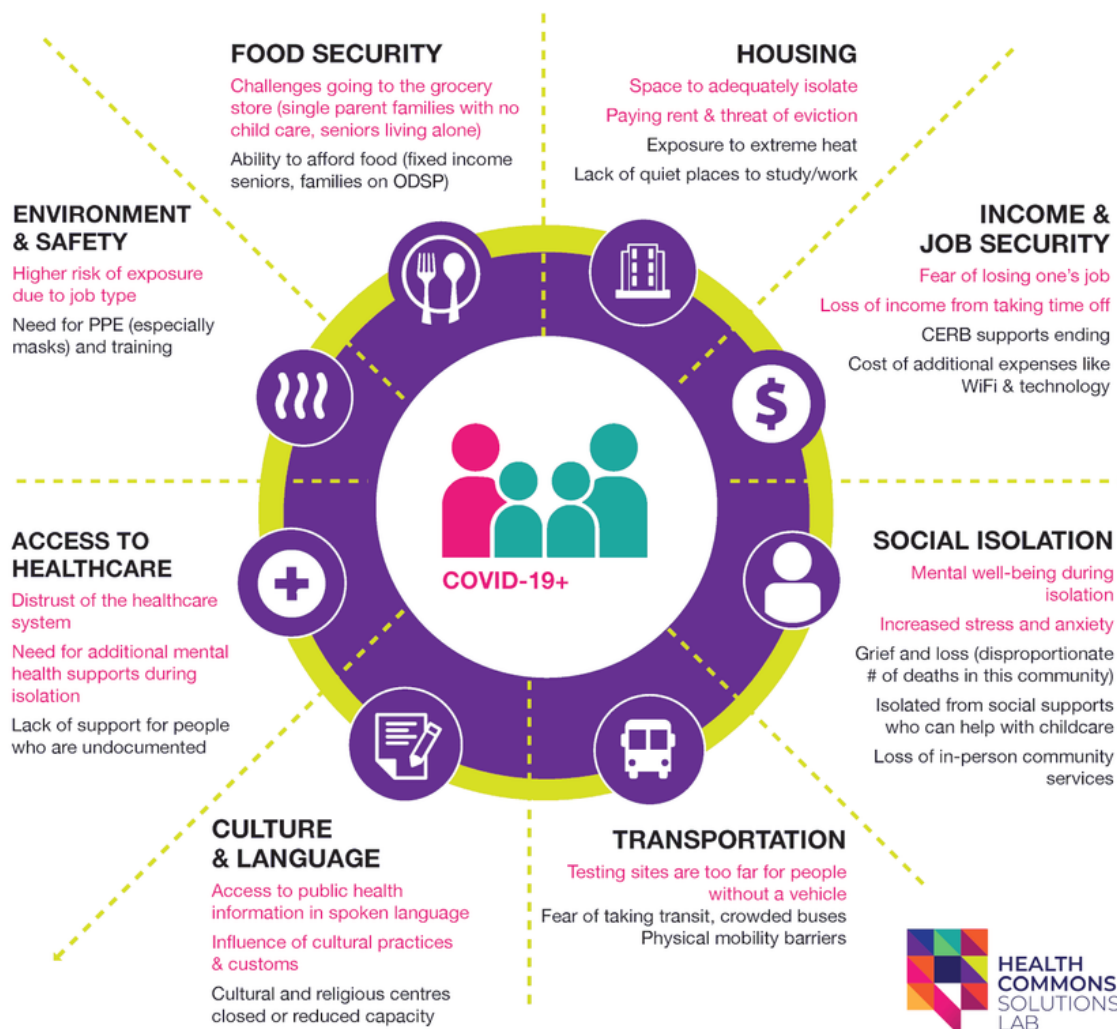


Image: Health Commons

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS

Earlier this year, we spoke with nine Community Ambassadors in Ontario about what their job means to them and what a typical day looks like.

Click each of the images below to explore more about what a day in their life looks like, and how they are each making a difference in their community.

day in the life of a
COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR




Tell us about yourself

I am a Community Health Ambassador with Roots Community Services. At Roots, we focus primarily on the structural barriers that affect the Black, African and Caribbean (BAC) communities and try to invoke strategies to overcome those barriers. I take this opportunity as an ambassador to educate myself on my own culture and learn more about the diaspora that is the BAC community.

Name: Jamaul Taylor
Community: Roots Community Services

day in the life of a
COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR



Tell us about yourself

I work as a community health ambassador in the Thorncliffe park neighbourhood and I have been involved in this neighbourhood for more than 10 years. I help run a program for women to improve their English. During the pandemic, many people had language barriers and many seniors, in particular, had a lot of barriers when accessing the vaccine. I support people experiencing barriers in accessing healthcare.

Name: Suganthine Sundaralingam
Community: Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities

day in the life of a
COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR



Tell us about yourself

I am a community health ambassador. I lost my husband to cancer at the beginning of the pandemic and since then, I devoted my life completely to the community. I have taken the hard experiences I have been through to help and empower others.

Name: Kashmira Dhamani
Community: Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities

day in the life of a
COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR



Tell us about yourself

I work mostly with south east Asian communities who struggle with the language barriers. Whenever we have a clinic, some people do not know how to answer the screening questions or they need someone to come along with them, who can speak or translate for them. So I started volunteering for the vaccine engagement team to help people access the services they need.

Name: Nita Goswami
Community: Settlement Assistance and Family Support Services (SAFSS)

day in the life of a
COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR




Tell us about yourself

I am a lead community health ambassador in the Taylor Massey neighbourhood. It feels like a town in itself as I live near several high rise buildings with thousands of people. From childhood, community giving was part of something that we all have in the family. I grew up watching my grandfather, my aunt, and my uncle devote their time to their community and I built my work through witnessing this.

Name: Roxia Rashid
Community: The Neighbourhood Organization (TNO)

day in the life of a
COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR



Tell us about yourself

I focus on south Scarborough, serving different populations. What I enjoy the most is serving the community, giving a personal touch, getting to really know someone, and being able to go the extra mile. Our work is about building relationships, not just on the phone, but also in person and giving someone something more than they expected.

Name: Charlotte Naranjit
Community: Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities

day in the life of a
COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR



Tell us about yourself

I am a community health ambassador. I have always wanted to help the community. I work for the whole community in the flemingdon area. We started with doing pop up vaccination clinics. We talk to managers in buildings and get their permission to come and provide support in the building, answer people's questions and provide them with resources. Everything we do is open for the entire community.

Name: Mehar Qaisar
Community: Flemingdon Community Health centre

day in the life of a
COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR



Tell us about yourself

I joined as a Community Ambassador to meet the needs of transitional shelter clients and to try to get an uptake in vaccine. As part of my role, we do health navigation and promotions. We support people by telling them where they can go to access the services that they needed.

Name: Edward Pereira
Community: Toronto Shelter Network

day in the life of a
COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR



Tell us about yourself

I am a project coordinator for the Toronto Vaccination Initiative at the Toronto shelter network and I support the community health ambassador program. I work with our health partners in supporting various health promotion initiatives like COVID-19 vaccination promotion, shingles pneumococcal vaccination, STI testing, and ovarian cancer awareness.

Name: Maiesha Rahman
Community: Toronto Shelter Network

EXPANDING THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS IN ONTARIO

As community needs and priorities shift beyond COVID-19, and amidst shortages across the health care system in Ontario, Community Ambassadors are moving into other areas of focus - making this model valuable far beyond its original purpose. Here are some examples:

Cancer screening: Increasing access to screening for under/never screened populations.

Mental health: Connecting people to services and supports, advocating for them so they do not have to do this on their own, and supporting with translation, transportation, etc.

Emerging best practices: Advancing wholistic care by helping community members identify and make sense of the team of people supporting their care and bridging disconnected services and supports.

Primary care: Helping alleviate pressure on primary care by task shifting, offering both support and time to patients who are learning about their health conditions and are connecting to the services they need.

Chronic care: Helping coordinate care and create access to care as it relates to diabetes, cardiac health (blood pressure), etc.

Even so, we acknowledge that you cannot solve health equity issues with one solution. Community Ambassadors are part of a broad workforce and infrastructure required to create wellbeing at a hyperlocal level, acting as a bridge to a more effective system more broadly.



Image: Health Commons

HEALTH COMMONS' BACKBONE SUPPORT FOR AMBASSADORS

Health Commons has been mandated by the Province of Ontario to provide backbone support to the 17 funded community agencies. We support collective impact by integrating and sharing practices, insights, and emerging strategies from community partners. We are committed to amplifying successes and understanding challenges so we can help address barriers and scale effective practices that are coming out of the community. We provide Lead Agencies and Community Ambassadors end-to-end support including research, tool development, coordination, facilitation, and communication so Community Ambassadors can flourish in their roles.

Since 2021, we have been exploring the solutions and approaches that Community Ambassadors use to close gaps between what people need and what the health system in Ontario offers. This document captures lessons that can inform the evolution of core infrastructure that is required to support these essential roles as they expand beyond a COVID response. Bearing witness to the unprecedented reach and impact of Community Ambassadors in closing equity gaps and informing health service design, we are committed to advocating for the formalization of Community Ambassador roles within Ontario. Our hope is that this document strengthens the case that communities are making across the province for stable and embedded community-based roles in the health care system.



Image: Health Commons

Above: Health Commons facilitating a Community Ambassador training about mental health in 2023.

Right: Health Commons staff hosting the March 2023 inaugural Community Ambassador Gathering. [Click the image to learn more about the Gathering.](#)



Image: Health Commons

The Health Commons Community Ambassador network consists of:

24 Community Ambassadors from funded lead agencies

193 Community Ambassadors from non-funded agencies

Health Commons has hosted:

64 Community Ambassador open sessions

23 Community Ambassador trainings with **500+** participants

12 Lead Agency open sessions

1 provincial Community Ambassador gathering with **55+** global attendees

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WHAT THIS BACKBONE SUPPORT LOOKS LIKE

Community of Practice: We create space for Community Ambassadors and Lead Agencies to regularly share lessons learned, tools, and resources with each other and with other ecosystem experts and partners. This takes place through:

- Private Community Ambassador Facebook and LinkedIn pages
- Bi-weekly virtual open sessions facilitated by experts who share expertise, tools, resources, lessons learned, and examples of tactics, strategies, and models that Community Ambassadors can adapt and apply within their own contexts
- Monthly virtual open sessions with Lead Agencies, largely focused on spread and scale of the role and impact of Community Ambassadors

Training: We offer foundational skill building that is grounded in a health equity framework to support Community Ambassadors in the following areas:

- Onboarding to the Community Ambassador role
- Understanding different worldviews and trauma-informed, culturally-safe care
- Social determinants of health and holistic health care
- Emotional conversations, navigating stigma, and de-escalation
- Finding useful resources for community members

WHY COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS ARE NEEDED

In general, Community Ambassadors in Ontario are providing support within communities where some or all of these key things are happening:

Communities are facing barriers to accessing, navigating, and/or using care. These barriers may be related to location, language, or eligibility and many exist because of prior and ongoing experiences of colonization, racism, discrimination, etc.

Wholistic and basic needs of food, shelter, adequate income, etc. take precedence over the need for physical health care. Because of how they impact wellbeing, these needs must be addressed before/while navigating a complex health system.

Primary care providers need and want support to overcome resource constraints, a partner to task shift with, and/or someone to be a bridge between hyperlocal community and clinical care.

Community members want or need personalized navigation of the complex health and social care systems.

People are not accessing services when they need them because they do not trust or feel safe in these spaces. For many people who have experienced discrimination by health or social care systems, these spaces do not feel safe.

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In the communities where Community Ambassadors work, some of the most common social determinants of health that are not accessed consistently include:

Safe, well-paying, and reliable employment

Safe, affordable, and reliable food, housing, transportation, child care, etc.

Resources to pay for basic utilities, clothing, etc.

Safety and trust within the health care system

Conditions for positive mental health

Documentation or citizenship required to access services

Access to translators or language supports required to access services

HOW COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS ARE HELPING

1

THEY **CREATE SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SPACES** THROUGH:

Culturally-relevant and judgment-free approaches, languages, and connections that meet people where they are at.

Shifting power to the person, for example by taking conversations and aspects of care outside of a clinical setting where people can feel in control and be themselves in a space that is neutral and familiar.

2

THEY **EXPAND THE BASKET OF SERVICES** THAT IS AVAILABLE TO PEOPLE BY:

Encouraging disease screening and management that people would otherwise not necessarily access, like cancer screening, blood pressure checks, and diabetes checks.

Taking a familial response - not just supporting an individual person, but serving all those who the person defines as their unit, connections, family, etc.

Connecting people to more than just physical health care by creating access to the broader social determinants of health that each person needs to be well.

3

THEY PROVIDE **WRAP-AROUND SUPPORTS** THROUGH:

Hands-on navigation at each step of the process, in a timely manner.

Cultural and linguistic translation of information, conversations with providers, etc.

Interpreting and relaying information back in a way that makes sense and is familiar, appropriate, relatable, not technical, etc.

Physically accompanying people or transporting them to appointments.

Following-up with people to see how their appointment went, if it was helpful for them, what the next steps are, etc.

Task shifting with primary care providers, bringing the gift of time to an overburdened health care system.

WHY COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS ARE IDEAL TO ADDRESS EQUITY GAPS

Time and again, we have heard from community members and leaders that only Community Ambassadors can do what Community Ambassadors can do.

So what makes them so ideally suited to the job? Here are some core attributes and competencies we have identified through our relationship with Community Ambassadors.

This is a summary only. See the [appendix](#) for details.

- 1** The key feature of Community Ambassadors is their **lived experience**. As members of the communities they serve, Community Ambassadors understand how people experience the social determinants of health and how they experience the health and social care systems within and outside of the community. They deeply understand the codes of conduct, protocol, and social norms and the complex ecosystem of assets and services available within the community. They know where gaps exist.
- 2** Another key feature of Community Ambassadors is that they **create and maintain a consistent presence in the community**, showing up for people in places that are familiar for them and that are part of their day to day - like grocery stores, places of worship, and their homes.
- 3** Another key feature of Community Ambassadors is that they **explore complex, nuanced, and less mainstream ways of being**. Coupled with empathy, patience, optimism, and a genuine curiosity to understand where people are at, where they want to go, and how they want to get there.



Image: Health Commons

THE IMPACT COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS ARE HAVING

The pandemic highlighted the key role that trust plays in people's ability to benefit equally and equitably from health care services. Health care must feel connected to the realities that people are facing. Ignoring people's social determinants of health, failing to make connections between cultural safety and access, and sharing information that excludes images, language, or examples that reflect peoples' day to day lives undermines the message that "health care is here for you."

While the system may not be built for the diversity of experiences, backgrounds, and needs that is required, **it is possible to invest in and grow the capacity of roles that create bridges between communities and the health care system.** The impact of Community Ambassadors goes far beyond what is possible to measure, and we are seeing that connection leads to sharing of information which leads to taking self-determined steps towards better health.

This is a summary only. See the [appendix](#) for details.

- 1** Community Ambassadors honour and respect self-determination and **increase peoples' confidence in their ability to understand and meet their own needs.**
- 2** Community Ambassadors **increase system efficiency and effectiveness through coordinated care and a more flexible approach** than is possible in over-stretched primary care or social service settings.
- 3** Community Ambassadors **invest in and build local trust, capacity, competencies, and skills** that are required to address comprehensive health needs.



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WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

Image: Health Commons



IMAGINING THE FUTURE

The Community Ambassador model emerged in Ontario as a strong model to provide a hyperlocal response during COVID-19, and in many ways was organically rooted in pre-existing, long-standing community-led models of support and care. As community needs and priorities shift beyond COVID, and amidst shortages across the health care system, Community Ambassadors are moving into other areas of focus - making this program valuable far beyond the COVID response.

DO YOU SEE A ROLE, FUNCTION, OR GAP COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS CAN FILL?

We invite you to use this document to inform hiring Community Ambassadors within your own organization and to share their story with others. This will help us to spread more awareness and to collaboratively create a future where Community Ambassador roles are more broadly deployed as part of a health care system in Ontario that is rooted in equity.

Community Ambassadors go by other names as well, like Engagement Ambassador, Vaccine Ambassador, Community Health Ambassador, Community Health Worker, Community Outreach worker, or Community Engagement Lead. Click [here](#) for a sample job description. As a reminder, some of the attributes you could look for include:

Lived experience: Deep understanding of community assets, norms, languages, codes of ethics; understand stigma and how to navigate it; understand how people experience the health and social care systems.

Knowledge translation: Translating complex medical, clinical, or technical language into something that is culturally relevant, easier to understand, and appropriate.

Human touch: Listening deeply to make sure people feel heard and are connected to the support they need, through authentic and compassionate peer-to-peer connections.

Trust and respect: Being a consistent face for people, quickly building trust and deep relationships. There is a reason Community Ambassadors are asked for by name!

Practical navigation: Making complex systems easier and more user-friendly, through creativity, empathy, and an ability to connect obscure and disconnected ideas and needs.

Voice of community: Providing unfiltered insights into what is happening on the ground knowing where gaps and how to address them.

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APPENDIX - WHAT THEY ARE IDEAL TO ADDRESS EQUITY GAPS



Click [here](#) to go back to the summary page

1 A key feature of Community Ambassadors is their **lived experience**. They are differently situated from other health care roles because they:

Understand how different topics are interpreted and perceived, including what is taboo and where stigma lives. They know how to navigate and overcome this in a way where people can feel heard and make informed decisions about when and how to access the care they need and in a way that feels comfortable.

Put people at ease by creating a space that feels familiar and safe, including knowing if, when, how, and why to engage people and the right questions to ask and how to have sensitive and complex conversations that do not perpetuate harm, stigma, or discomfort.

Understand what assets are available within the community, including when these assets shift and change and what that means for people, and how to advocate for what is required to fill gaps.

Focus on community-led solutions that are built from what people want and need (and how they need it), rather than from agendas that are externally driven.

Create empathetic and authentic peer to peer connections that are rooted in a shared journey, with the primary goal of serving peoples needs in a way that makes most sense to them.

2 Another key feature of Community Ambassadors is that they **create and maintain a consistent presence in the community**. They are differently situated from other health care roles because they:

Build the trust and respect of the community over time, because people know they are integrated in the community, not acting in an extractive way, and are recognized as an authentic connection to the community.

See people in their home or community settings, which means they can see the full picture of what their wellbeing looks like and what is required to improve and sustain it.

Create a space where people feel comfortable to share and connect, removing masks that we often wear in places where we don't see our culture, worldviews, and ways of being recognized or understood.

3 Another key feature of Community Ambassadors is that they **explore complex, nuanced, and less mainstream ways of being**. They are differently situated from other health care roles because they:

Do not assume what the challenge is, what people need or know about the challenge, or how to respond, instead asking them where to start.

Quickly respond to diverse worldviews, ways of knowing and being, and expectations about what people want their experience to be like.

Listen to what is needed so people can be connected to relevant offerings. Giving time for people to share details, complexity, and interconnection, so they can refer and navigate them to the supports they need to take the next step in managing their own health.

Are comfortable with ambiguity, and are able to sit in complex spaces where real-time problem solving and curious exploration unlocks the best plan for each person.



APPENDIX - THEIR IMPACT



Click [here](#) to go back to the summary page

1 Community Ambassadors honour and respect self-determination and **increase peoples' confidence in their ability to understand and meet their own needs.** For example:

Amplifying and rooting their approaches and priorities in local voices, needs, and dreams.

Creating a space where people are able to speak freely, without “a mask” on (we are not talking about a COVID mask), and without artifice. This means solutions can be directed at the truth and people feel understood and validated as their most authentic selves.

Respecting peoples' choice of if, when, where, and how to engage with Community Ambassadors, which increases feelings of empowerment, control, and safety.

Redistributing power by integrating robust worldviews.

Leveraging a knowledge base that is rooted in a deep lived experience and expertise of the socio-cultural context of the community they are serving.

2 Community Ambassadors **increase system efficiency and effectiveness through coordinated care and a more flexible approach** than is possible in over-stretched primary care or social service settings.

Orienting to the priorities of the community to enhance uptake and impact of preventative and early intervention services

Seeing patterns, and faster, because they are seeing people in their real life settings, like at home, and can support more tailored and accurate responses.

Sparking conversations about receiving care that people would not otherwise agree to receive (e.g., breast or cervical screening, HPV vaccines, etc.)

3 Community Ambassadors **invest in and build local trust, capacity, competencies, and skills that are required to address comprehensive health needs.**

Making mainstream systems feel friendly and safer, creating a bridge within the community and new pathways for people who have been excluded from the systems and services they need.

Promoting development of local innovative, community-led approaches to getting care into the hands of people.



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