

Community Health Worker

Community health workers use specific cultural or community knowledge, and strong networks within their own communities to promote health.

Community health workers are often leaders in their own communities and act as a key link between specialist health knowledge and theory, and the needs of communities. As “interpreters” of this knowledge, their role is a critical one. They make public health messages and actions meaningful to those who often are not reached by mainstream and commercial messages.

The work involves action in a wide range of health issues, such as alcohol, social environments, tobacco control and oral health.

ACTIVITIES COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS MIGHT DO:

- advise other professionals about language issues and the need for cultural sensitivity
- work to set up a child car-seat scheme
- arrange a community meeting to address the issue of young people involved in drug taking
- demonstrate low-fat cooking methods to whānau and ringawera (kitchen workers or cooks)
- provide support to family and whanau dealing with social services.

What school subjects do you need?

English, Māori, or your own language are the key requirements. It might also be helpful to have skills in information technology and science.

What qualifications will you need?

Up until recently, a persons personal attributes and life experience were key to being a successful community health worker. Now, however, it is increasingly expected that community health workers have at least a Certificate in Community Skills or a Certificate in Health Promotion to support them in their role. This study may well be completed while the person is in their job.

Who employs community health workers?

Iwi providers, other Māori organisations, Pacific, Asian, and new migrant agencies along with district health boards, non-government organisations and a wide range of other organisations currently employ community health workers.

The more community health workers formalise their qualifications and training, the greater likelihood that they will evolve into an even more critical workforce within public health.

CAREER 5:

COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER

JUSTEENA, Te Kohao Health, Waikato

JUSTEENA LEAF (NGAPUHI, NGAI TE RANGI) IS ONE OF 10 COMMUNITY HEALTH workers at Te Kahao Health (a Māori health organisation), where she is responsible for programmes relating to Auahi Kore (Smokefree) and Aukati Kaipapa (Smoking Cessation). Her day-to-day work involves health education and working with whānau to support them to give up smoking and pursue healthy lifestyles. Justeena was inspired to get into community health work as a year 12 student by a youth education group who ran a sexual health workshop at her school.

Justeena says doing the course in health promotion at Manukau Institute of Technology was a turning point for her because it gave her a structure and some really valuable theory upon which to base her years of flax-roots experience. She draws inspiration from the name of her organisation which is based on a famous saying from the Waikato region.

“Kotahi te kohao o te ngira e kuhuna ai te miro ma, te miro pango, te miro wheno”
“There is but a single eye of the needle through which white, black and red threads must pass”

She said that for her, the white, black and red threads represent the diversity of her region and remind her of the need to weave together all parts of the community, toward a single goal of strong, healthy whānau.

Justeena believes that to be a successful community health worker you need to be passionate about the kaupapa you are promoting and have a big heart for the people. She recommends that anyone interested in a job like hers should do some community work to get experience and then follow it up with good qualifications.

“If I could be three people I would because there is just so much to do. I really wish more people would get into public health because it’s such a positive way to make change”

