

UAMS Trains Huntsville High School Students with Community Health Worker Training

Eight students from Huntsville High School are on the path to become certified community health workers (CHWs) after completing the inaugural high school-based training program from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Institute for Community Health Innovation.

The high school CHW training is a first-of-its-kind in the state of Arkansas, and only the second in the nation. The training included 80 hours of hybrid instruction over a two-week period, with four days in-person at Huntsville High School. Students learned skills to better understand and respond to public health needs within a community setting. Topics included care coordination, effective communication, health education, and more.

“I’m interested in the medical field, and I feel like having the skills that this training offers can really help me,” said Taylor Hatfield, a student at Huntsville High School. “Even if you’re not looking to go into the medical field, [this training] provided a lot of good knowledge to have, like how to talk to people, how to listen, and how to communicate better.

“I’m leaning toward becoming an ER nurse, so I’m going to be encountering people every day, and I want to make sure I can talk to them and make them feel comfortable,” Hatfield added.

Last year, the State of Arkansas passed a law formally establishing the role of a community health worker as “an individual who is a trusted member of or has an unusually close understanding of the community that he or she is serving as a liaison, link, or intermediary between health services and the community,” facilitating improved access to health and social resources. With certification officially recognized by the state through the Community Health Worker Act, certified CHWs will soon be able to receive compensation for services from the Arkansas Medicaid Program or a health benefit plan.

“Community health workers are being seen more and more as an essential bridge between communities and healthcare services,” said Rosalinda Medrano, director of community programs at the Institute for Community Health Innovation. “This is not only a win for communities across Arkansas, but also for the next generation of healthcare leaders. Through collaborations with schools like Huntsville, we’re honored to help prepare those future leaders with the skills and experience needed to serve others and build lasting careers.”

The recent training was part of a Rural Communities Pathway project that is taking UAMS and other collaborators into schools in Madison and Carroll counties to prepare students for career opportunities in community health, while also working with staff and administrators to reduce behavioral risk factors for youth. The institute is working with schools in Huntsville, Eureka Springs, and Kingston to train teachers to identify and respond to risk behaviors, while engaging young people to develop and implement peer-driven behavioral health opportunities. Topics that teachers and students will explore include mental health awareness, stress management, substance abuse prevention, and more.

The institute developed the first CHW apprentice program in the United States in 2022, reducing the training time by half from two years to one. In partnership with the

Arkansas Community Health Worker Association, the institute has trained more than 450 CHWs since 2022.