

State Spotlight: Maine's StrengthenME Program Mobilizes Community Health Outreach Workers to Fill Workforce Gaps and Address Equity and Access Issues

Maine's [StrengthenME program](#) was developed via a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP) grant, offering free stress management and resiliency resources to anyone in Maine experiencing stress reactions to the COVID-19 Pandemic. These resources include a statewide call line, resource guides, an online wellness assessment and referral tool, and a coalition of community organizations to provide stress management and wellness support.

Leadership recognized the need to ensure the StrengthenME program was reaching historically underserved communities who were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. They also recognized that behavioral health workforce shortages were a limiting factor in serving these populations. To address both these challenges, the state identified and aggressively recruited eight organizations that employ Community Health Outreach Workers (CHOWs) that have existing access to and trust from Maine's historically underserved communities, many of whom are representative of the populations they serve.

Acknowledging that many of these organizations did not have existing capacity to apply for state contracts, state administrators worked to create a more equitable process, remove unnecessary barriers to application and implementation, provide individualized and hands-on support for suitable potential partners in applying for state contracts, and offer needed flexibility. Identifying and contracting with these organizations who have strong existing relationships and provide direct service in the community has been key to the success of the initiative.

CHOWs were trained via zoom to provide behavioral health crisis counseling and support via the CCP, and CHOW organizations report outcomes data in keeping with the CCP grant requirements. State staff meet regularly with CHOW organizations to gather feedback and provide support. A spirit of equal partnership and appreciation of the value and expertise of CHOW organizations is key to the program's success. Recognizing that these organizations are the experts on the populations they serve, they are given flexibility to provide behavioral health support in the manner and setting they deem most appropriate. CHOW organizations have engaged in tailored outreach and interventions, such as facilitating WhatsApp chat groups for families with school-aged children, setting up information booths outside housing developments, holding support groups for immigrant mothers, and other strategies to reach individuals in a natural and comfortable way. CHOW providers have served over 13,895 program participants through one-on-one and group supports since August of 2020. [Learn more about StrengthenME.](#)

[StrengthenME - Outreach & Support Services Statewide](#)

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