

Vermont Community Health Workers Physical Activity Guide

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Community Health Workers (CHWs) serve as a vital link between health care systems and the communities they serve. CHWs play a key role in helping individuals increase movement in ways that feel safe, enjoyable and realistic. They serve as bridges between the health care system, community resources, and people’s daily lives. This guide provides a **practical framework** to help CHWs in encouraging regular physical activity to improve health, prevent chronic disease and enhance well-being—while honoring different abilities, preferences and cultural contexts.

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CHW Roles in Addressing Physical Activity

- **Education:** Provide clear, accurate information about the benefits of regular activity.
- **Support:** Help community members build and maintain an active lifestyle through encouragement, goal setting and problem-solving.
- **Access:** Connect individuals with safe spaces, community programs, walking groups, gyms, or virtual exercise resources.
- **Cultural Competence:** Share physical activity guidance that respects cultural norms, traditions and individual preferences.
- **Advocacy:** Promote policies and community initiatives that increase opportunities for physical activity and equitable access to resources.

Why It Matters:

Movement helps prevent and manage chronic diseases, improves mental health and supports overall well-being. CHWs, trusted by the communities they serve, can motivate individuals, identify and overcome barriers to activity and connect individuals to local programs and safe spaces. By promoting physical activity alongside nutrition and other healthy behaviors, CHWs contribute to more equitable, holistic and resilient community health outcomes.

Table 1: Physical Activity Guidelines

Age	Amount of Activity
Kids 6–17	60+ min/day moderate-to-vigorous; 3+ days strength/bone activities
Adults 18–64	150 min/week moderate or 75 min/week vigorous; 2+ days strength training
Adults 65+	Same as adults; include balance & flexibility exercises

Getting Started: Tips for Community Health Workers

- **Use a strengths-based approach:** Focus on what people **can** do and always approach physical activity with empathy and without judgment.
- **Avoid assumptions:** Let people share as much detail as they feel comfortable.
- **Be prepared with up-to-date local resource information:** Know about physical activity resources, fitness centers and classes, vouchers for programs, etc. Support may include more than referrals—CHWs may help schedule appointments, facilitate communication or assist with interpretation.
- **Respect people’s choices:** If someone declines support, honor their decision while keeping the door open for future assistance.

Step 1: Screen with Empathy

Approach the conversation with empathy and non-judgmental language, normalizing the topic. **Sample phrasing:** *“Finding ways to move our bodies can sometimes be challenging. May I ask you a few questions to learn more about what feels comfortable and possible for you?”*

A CHW or another staff member may conduct screening and record electronically (EHR), on paper or verbally. CHWs can screen for food insecurity during routine interactions or assessments, particularly when someone may be at risk. Confirm your organization’s specific screening process.

Physical Activity Screening Questions:

1. In the past week, how many days were you active? *Give examples as needed.*
2. Are there any reasons it’s been hard for you to be physically active?

Additional Questions to Explore:

1. Do you have safe and accessible spaces to move, exercise or play outside?
2. Are there health concerns or physical limitations that make activity difficult?
3. Do you feel motivated or confident to engage in regular activity?
4. What would help you succeed in regular activity?

Note: Inclusive Screening Tips

- Focus on “movement” rather than only “exercise.”
- Ask open-ended questions that highlight what people *can* do.
- Normalize adaptive options like chair exercises, stretching, household activities or short bursts of movement.

Positive Screen: Any indication that the person is not meeting recommended levels of physical activity, is experiencing barriers, or lacks confidence/motivation to be active.

Essentially, a positive screen flags anyone who may benefit from support, resources, or referral to programs that can help increase movement safely and sustainably.

Safety & Risk Screening

Before starting any new physical activity, CHWs should help participants identify potential risks. Screen for warning signs that require medical attention:

- Chest pain, shortness of breath beyond normal exertion, dizziness, fainting
- Severe joint pain, uncontrolled blood pressure, or other chronic conditions not cleared by a provider

Step 2: Identify Barriers

After a screen indicating limited physical activity, whether conducted by a CHW or another provider—it's important to explore the specific barriers the individual faces. Ask open-ended questions to understand which barriers apply, explore what participants feel is achievable and collaboratively identify solutions.

Sample phrasing: *"It sounds like being physically active might be challenging for you. Can you tell me more about the obstacles you face in getting the activity you need?"* Refer to **Appendix I** for a step-by-step CHW sample script.

Common Barriers and Potential Supports

Below are some commonly identified barriers to physical activity, along with general strategies to support individuals in overcoming them. These suggestions are intended to help community health workers provide personalized, accessible, and culturally appropriate guidance that considers individual circumstances, local resources, and seasonal or geographic factors—such as Vermont's winter conditions or rural settings.

Barrier: Lack of Time

Potential Solutions: Break activity into short, manageable 5–10 minute sessions throughout the day. Fit movement into daily routines, such as walking to the mailbox, doing household chores, taking the stairs, or stretching during TV breaks. Combine activities with errands—walk to the local store, community center or school. Involve children by turning movement into family time, like a short walk after dinner, a snow shoveling relay or active games indoors on cold Vermont days. Encourage micro-bursts of activity whenever possible—every bit counts!

Barrier: Low Motivation

Potential Solutions: Find a buddy, family member, or local group (e.g., walking clubs, community center classes, seasonal outdoor activities) to stay accountable. Set small, achievable goals and track progress. Incorporate culturally meaningful or fun activities—like gardening, dancing or outdoor chores—to make movement enjoyable and sustainable.

Barrier: Physical Limitations

Potential Solutions: Suggest low-impact options such as chair exercises, stretching, water-based activities or adaptive movement programs. Provide Vermont-specific adaptive resources like community fitness classes for older adults or accessible winter programs.

Barrier: Weather

Potential Solutions: Suggest indoor walking spaces, home-based exercises, online workout videos or winter-friendly activities like snowshoeing, sledding or indoor community center classes. Encourage layering and safe winter footwear to stay active despite seasonal conditions. Check out lending libraries for snowshoe rentals.

Barrier: Safety concerns

Potential Solutions: Encourage exercising in well-lit areas and on designated walking paths or trails. Suggest exercising with a friend, family member or group for added safety and accountability. Use community centers, gyms or indoor facilities when outdoor conditions feel unsafe. Offer guidance on basic personal safety strategies (e.g., carrying a phone, visibility gear or reflective clothing).

Barrier: Limited Options or Cost

Potential Solutions: Connect participants with local community centers, parks, walking trails and recreational facilities. Highlight free or low-cost options, such as Vermont's free state park days or annual passes, local playgrounds and public walking paths. Suggest online exercise resources, virtual classes or community-led walking/exercise groups. Encourage creativity with home-based movement, short activity breaks and adaptive activities for small spaces. Explore apps and other technology-based programs.

Barrier: Cultural & Personal Preferences or Relevance

Potential Solutions: Recognize diversity in movement preferences: Different cultures and communities may have unique traditions, practices or beliefs around physical activity. Suggest familiar or enjoyable activities, adapting as needed. Connect individuals to local programs or community spaces that support culturally relevant or accessible activity.

Barrier: Different Health Needs

Potential Solutions: Refer individuals to physical activity programs (e.g., community wellness programs, cardiac rehab, MyHealthy VT). Encourage collaboration with healthcare providers, physical therapists or certified trainers for guidance. Serve as an advocate to help participants access safe and appropriate activities. **Refer to Table 2** for guidance on tailoring to specific populations. *Always remind clients to follow medical advice from their healthcare provider. CHWs support, not replace, clinical care.

Table 2: Special Populations

Population	Activities	Tips and Safety	Adaptations
Older Adults	Walking, chair exercises, light resistance training, balance exercises, gentle stretching	Focus on safety, balance, and flexibility. *Refer to the Walk with Ease or Bone Builders programs (available through senior centers, hospitals, or community groups)	Modify intensity, use support (chairs, rails), shorter sessions and balance aids as needed
Arthritis	Walking, swimming, cycling, gentle stretching, range-of-motion exercises	Low-impact activities reduce joint stress; warm-up and cool-down; avoid overloading affected joints	Water exercises, chair yoga, or adaptive equipment to reduce joint strain
Diabetes	Walking, cycling, swimming; resistance exercises with bands or light weights	Supports blood glucose management and cardiovascular health; aim for consistency	Use seated or recumbent equipment; adapt resistance with bands or water exercises
Heart Disease	Walking, swimming, cycling	Moderate intensity; monitor heart rate and exertion; avoid sudden high-intensity activity	Chair-based cardio, water aerobics, or low-impact machines for limited mobility
Chronic Lung Disease (COPD)	Walking, seated exercises, breathing-focused movement	Short, frequent sessions; pace activity and include rest breaks	Seated or supported exercises; use breathing cues and rest as needed
Cancer (during treatment)	Walking, stretching, yoga, light resistance training	Adjust for fatigue or treatment side effects; emphasize gentle movement	Modify intensity and duration; allow flexibility based on daily energy levels; include seated or low-impact options
Disabilities/ Adaptive Needs	Chair exercises, resistance bands, water-based activities, adaptive sports	Tailor to abilities and preferences; prioritize safety and comfort	Use adaptive equipment or assistive devices

Step 3: Support Activity Choices & Develop a Plan

After screening and assessing barriers, CHWs can collaborate with individuals to create a personalized physical activity plan. Develop a step-by-step action plan to support progress and success. Refer to **Appendix II** for a sample Goal Worksheet.

Sample phrasing: *“Based on what we’ve discussed about your current activity and any challenges you’re facing, let’s work together to create a plan that feels realistic and doable for you. What types of movement do you enjoy or feel comfortable trying?”*

Key Actions for CHWs

1. Collaborate on Goal Setting

- Work with participants to set **realistic, achievable movement goals**. Focus on **small, incremental changes** to build confidence and success.
- Encourage participants to **choose activities they enjoy** (e.g., walking, dancing, gardening, chair exercises). Confirm that planned activities are safe for the participant’s health.

2. Develop a Step-by-Step Action Plan

- Break goals into **specific, manageable steps**.
- Identify **frequency, duration, and intensity** for activities, using gradual progression.
- Plan for **when, where and how** the participant will engage in physical activity.
- Discuss **strategies for overcoming barriers**, such as those addressed in the previous section. *Encourage medical clearance when necessary, especially for individuals with chronic conditions or mobility limitations.

3. Incorporate Social and Cultural Support

- Include **family, friends or community groups** as motivators when appropriate.
- Respect **cultural practices** and adapt activities to align with traditions and values.
- Highlight **community resources**, such as local parks, recreation centers or virtual exercise programs.

4. Tracking

- Encourage use of **journals, charts, or apps** to monitor activity.
- Schedule **regular check-ins** to review progress, troubleshoot barriers, and adjust goals.

Step 4: Follow Up

A follow-up conversation is an opportunity to check in on physical activity, strengthen trust and keep individuals motivated. Even small steps—like a short walk, gentle stretching or a few minutes of movement—are meaningful. Celebrating progress, no matter how modest, helps people feel encouraged and supported in staying active.

Key Actions for CHWs

Review Goals:

Ask gently about previous goals: *“Last time you mentioned wanting to walk three times a week. How did that go?”*

Listen without judgment and explore barriers together.

Celebrate Successes:

Recognize effort, not just results: *“Great job taking a short walk! Every bit counts.”*

Reinforce that progress happens gradually.

Encourage Confidence:

Ask what the individual feels most able to do next: *“What small step would you like to try this week?”*

Normalize challenges and offer ongoing support.

I. Sample Script: CHW and Individual Dialogue

This script is designed for use when discussing physical activity with individuals. It offers simple, supportive language that can be adapted to help individuals feel heard, reduce stigma, and connect individuals with resources in a way that works for them.

Building Rapport

CHW: Hi [Individual's Name], it's really good to see you today. How have you been doing?

Individual: [Responds]

CHW: Thanks for sharing that. If you're okay with it, I'd love to talk a little about movement and physical activity—just to see how things are going for you. Does that sound alright?

Exploring Current Habits

CHW: Can you tell me what a typical day of movement looks like for you?

Individual: [Shares]

CHW: Thanks, that's really helpful. What are some ways you enjoy being active—like walking, dancing, stretching or other activities?

Individual: [Responds]

CHW: And have you run into any challenges with staying active—like time, health concerns, motivation or access to safe spaces? (It's okay to revisit questions from the initial screening).

Connecting to Goals

CHW: Earlier you mentioned [example: wanting more energy / managing stress / improving strength]. Would you like to hear some simple ways that movement might support that?

Individual: [Responds yes/no]

CHW: Great. Even small steps can make a big difference.

Sharing Practical Tips

CHW: Here are a few ideas you might find helpful:

- **Walking:** Try a short walk after meals or around your neighborhood.
 - **Stretching & Flexibility:** Take a few minutes to stretch in the morning or evening.
 - **Strength:** Light resistance exercises with bands or household items a few times a week.
 - **Movement Breaks:** Stand up, march in place, or do chair exercises during TV or computer time.
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Problem-Solving Barriers

Individual: [Raises concern: lack of time, fatigue, no safe place, etc.]

CHW: I hear you—that’s a challenge for a lot of people. Let’s think together about what might work for you.

Encouraging Small Steps

CHW: Of all the ideas we talked about, which one feels most doable for you this week?

Individual: [Chooses one]

CHW: Perfect—that’s a great step. Even small amounts of movement really add up. How confident are you that you can try that?

Closing & Support

CHW: Thanks for sharing with me today. You’re already moving in the right direction just by having this conversation. I’ll check in next time to see how it’s going. If you’d like, I can connect you to resources like [community walking groups, senior centers, adaptive programs, online classes, MyHealthyVT, etc.].

Individual: [Responds]

CHW: Wonderful. You’re not alone in this—we’ll take it step by step together.

Tip: Keep it warm, conversational, and flexible—the script is a guide, not a checklist. Focus on **what feels realistic and enjoyable** for the individual.

II. Physical Activity SMART Goal Worksheet

Individual Name: _____

Date: _____

1. Specific

What exactly do you want to do? - Example: Walk around my neighborhood -

Goal: _____

2. Measurable

How will you track your progress? - Example: Use a step counter or log minutes walked -

Goal: _____

3. Achievable

Is this realistic for your schedule and abilities? - Example: Start with 10 minutes, 3 times per week - Goal: _____

4. Relevant

How does this goal fit your health needs or lifestyle? - Example: I want to have more energy and improve my blood sugar -

Goal: _____

5. Time-Bound

When will you reach this goal or check progress? - Example: By the end of 4 weeks - Goal:

Optional Notes / Barriers / Support Needed:

Individual Signature: _____

CHW Signature: _____

Resources

Area Agencies on Aging: <https://www.vermont4a.org/>

MyHealthy Vermont: <https://www.myhealthyvt.org/>

Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion: <https://odphp.health.gov/our-work/nutrition-physical-activity/physical-activity-guidelines>

Special Olympics: <https://www.specialolympicsvermont.org/>

Vermont 2-1-1: <https://vermont211.org/>

Vermont Adaptive Sports: <https://www.vermontadaptive.org/>

Vermont Association of Community Health Workers:
<https://www.vtassociationofcommunityhealthworkers.com/>

Vermont Department of Health Community Health Workers: <http://healthvermont.gov/chws>

Vermont Department of Health Arthritis: <https://www.healthvermont.gov/wellness/arthritis>

Vermont Governors Council on Physical Fitness & Sports: <https://vermontfitness.org/>

Vermont Rail Trail System: <https://railtrails.vermont.gov/>

Vermont State Forest Parks and Recreation: <https://www.vtstateparks.com>

You First: <https://www.healthvermont.gov/wellness/you-first>

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