Lay Health Ambassador's first year report highlights diversity, community engagement, successful aid services

How WEW's initiative is closing the healthcare gap through targeted community outreach and education.

Lay Health Ambassadors, from left: Monica Soto, Iuliia Kravchuk, Jana Jenkins, Alondra Lopez, and Nicole Roscon Soto, gather to celebrate the success of the Women Empowering Women (WEW) Lay Health Ambassadors program, which focuses on improving healthcare access in western North Dakota through community outreach and multilingual support.
Contributed Women Empowering Women

By Manuel Holguin JR
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News Reporting

DICKINSON — Women Empowering Women (WEW) has released its Final Summary Report on the first year of its Lay Health Ambassadors program , highlighting the nonprofit's success in providing multilingual health outreach, translation services, and community education through various events and partnerships.

The report also outlines plans to further expand healthcare access and support for women in the region.

The Lay Health Ambassadors program aims to improve healthcare access for women aged 18-44 in western North Dakota, addressing challenges in communities with language barriers, limited healthcare knowledge, and cultural differences.

Ray Ann Kilen, WEW's board president, expressed surprise at the program's results. "It was the first year we employed the lay health ambassador model. The data was quite eye-opening, especially the kinds of assistance people sought," she said. "That's really something you don't often think about."

Community Lay Health Ambassadors Jana Jenkins, Alondra Lopez, and Nicole Roscon-Soto at a Women Empowering Women event, providing healthcare information and resources.
Contributed Women Empowering Women

Who Are the Lay Health Ambassadors?

The program's three Lay Health Ambassadors—two bilingual in Spanish and a third who connects with African American, Diaspora American, and other New American communities—are credited as key drivers of the program's success. The initiative also provides translation services in Swahili and Kinyarwanda when needed.

WEW partners with additional ambassadors, including a Hispanic liaison from Southwestern District Health and a Ukrainian liaison with the Dickinson Area Chamber of Commerce.

All ambassadors and liaisons attend monthly education and training sessions to address the diverse needs for translation and cultural understanding.

Visits, Opportunities, and Funding

The report shows that the program facilitated 256 visits, including 189 from Hispanic individuals, 53 from Black individuals, and 14 from those identifying as white or choosing not to respond.

Services provided included 41 referrals for Women's Way enrollment and 32 for the North Dakota Colorectal Program. Other assistance covered health insurance, primary care, grief support, and birth certificates. The program also provided translation services, immunizations, WIC support, and various health screenings.

Kilen emphasized the growing demand for these services, which she sees as both a signal to the state and a reminder to the community about the region's diverse population. "The city and the county are kind of like, 'It's really not our problem' that these people have these needs. So, for me, part of it is just an awareness of some of the needs of people who are moving here. People don't think about it."

She added, "I think this is a gentle reminder that we have a lot of people here who are not native to this country."

Financial Challenges and Future Expansion

WEW has faced financial challenges, relying on multiple sources of funding to sustain its services. Kilen explained that the organization started with a single

grant but has since secured additional funding to meet growing needs. “Last year, we received multiple grants, including one from a different division of the health department,” she said, noting that the funding process has been somewhat complicated but ultimately successful.

The Community Lay Health Ambassadors flyer promotes local health resources and multilingual support services available through the Women Empowering Women initiative.
Contributed Women Empowering Women

As the Lay Health Ambassador model expanded, WEW recognized the need to address broader health issues that affect the general population. “We started to understand that this goes beyond just New Americans… some health issues, like heart health, affect everybody,” Kilen said.

To meet this growing demand, WEW has secured funding for next year from a strategic health grant, along with additional support from Blue Cross Blue Shield

and the North Dakota Community Foundation to assist with outreach on heart health.

Looking ahead, Kilen said the organization plans to build on the successes of the past year. “Honestly, I don’t think we’re leaving anything behind. We’re becoming more aware of how to connect with the communities we’re serving, and we’re building trust, which is a huge part of serving people who are new to a community, especially those new to the country.”

By Manuel Holguin JR
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