



# Health Coach Training and Certification Standards

## Introduction

Increased healthcare costs, emphasis on chronic care management, and overwhelmed clinical staff have accelerated the need for resource-saving and alternative approaches to improve the delivery of primary care services, especially in rural and underserved areas. Non-clinical or lay staff, such as health coaches (HC) and community health workers (CHW) can support team-based care by providing person-centered care for chronic disease and lifestyle-related conditions to better engage patients in their self-management and treatment adherence. In addition, they can provide patient advocacy, assist with patient navigation, and provide referrals and resources that address negative Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) that impact health and access to care. This document focuses on training and certification standards for HC.

## Barriers to Incorporation of Health Coaches in Primary Care

Past barriers to the incorporation of these lay workers include: (1) lack of appreciation for the efficacy of health coaching using best practices; (2) lack of approved CPT codes or adoption of existing ones to engender sustainability; (3) lack of full integration of lay staff into the primary care team; and (4) lack of standardization of training and quality assurance for lay staff.

## Health Coach Standards

Our Tennessee Heart Health Network (TN-HHN) Population Health Subcommittee has worked over the last year to come to consensus on billing and reimbursement standards for HC services. The purpose of this report is to establish training and certification standards for lay health workers in Tennessee to ensure quality and standardization for patient care. Currently, the state of Tennessee lacks training and certification standards for this workforce.

## Health Coaches

HC typically have an undergraduate degree in a health promotion or health science field, with many holding a graduate degree as well. HC, like other types of CHW, are typically recruited from the community they serve and demonstrate cultural competence and humility. HC in primary care clinics provide patient coaching and outreach services and extend primary care into community through brief encounters at community events, community health centers, and public health screenings. Many HC specialize in chronic condition and lifestyle management and tend to have long-term (six months or more) coaching relationships with their clients.

Currently, the healthcare industry does not formally recognize a national standard for health coaches; however, the most recognized national standards have been developed by the National Board for Health and Wellness Coaching (NBHWC) (see <https://nbhwc.org>). The downside of requiring the full NBHWC certification as a state standard is that this program has burdensome requirements. Candidates must demonstrate previous health coaching experience and complete an extensive proprietary training program to take the examination. This greatly limits the practicality of increasing capacity of a scarce resource. Additionally, the NBHWC program does not require a validated, standardized competency demonstration for certification. Coaching is a complex skill set that cannot be demonstrated via multiple-choice questions.

### NBHWC Competencies for Health Coaches

1. Coaching Structure
2. Coaching Process - coaching relationship/communication techniques
3. Health and Wellness Topics including Chronic Disease
4. Ethics/Legal Issues

Therefore, the Tennessee Heart Health Network (TN-HHN) and its member organizations adhere to the NBHWC identified competencies and suggested curriculum. In addition, we require the satisfactory completion of a practical competency demonstration using a standardized, validated assessment tool for health coaching.

## TN-HHN Recognition and Approval of Existing Training Programs

The TN-HHN and its member organizations recognize existing HC training and certification programs whose curricula meet these national standards and who utilize a competency-based assessment with which to grant certification. To the best of our knowledge, the following training and certification programs in Tennessee currently meet these standards:

- [UTHSC Health Coach Certification Program](#)
- [Vanderbilt Health Coaching Program](#)
- [Coalition for Better Health Training for Preventive Health Specialists](#)

Contact Susan Butterworth, PhD at [sbutter1@uthsc.edu](mailto:sbutter1@uthsc.edu) for questions or suggestions regarding HC training and certification programs meriting TN-HHN recognition.

## Reference

The National Board For Health & Wellness Coaching. (2022) NBHWC Content Outline. NBHWC HWC Certifying Examination Content Outline. Accessed August 15, 2022. Available [here](#).