

Health Center Boards: *Benefits to Health Centers*

What are health centers?

Health centers are community-based and patient-directed organizations that deliver comprehensive, culturally competent, high-quality primary health care services.¹

With roots in the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty, health centers were inspired by a unique community-based health care model in South Africa – observed by American H. Jack Geiger when he was a young doctor and civil rights activist – that had brought about astonishing health improvements for the poorest citizens of that country. In 1965, the nation’s first community health centers were launched as a small demonstration program as part of the President Johnson’s Office of Economic Opportunity.² Today, over 1,400 health centers serve as the primary medical home for more than 28 million people across America.

How are health centers governed?

The majority of health centers are incorporated in their respective states as a nonprofit organization and have a board of directors that governs the organization. Governance refers to the legal process carried out by the board as a collective to ensure the efficiency and sustainability of the health center on behalf of the community it serves. Health center boards must comply with relevant state and federal laws. As a condition of receiving an award under the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Health Center Program, health center boards must also meet various requirements.³ The most effective boards are also aware of and implement good governance practices.⁴

¹ Definition from <https://bphc.hrsa.gov/about/what-is-a-health-center/index.html>.

² For more on the history of health centers, see www.nachc.org, *Community Health Forum: America’s Community Health Centers 50 Years* (Spring 2015), and <https://www.chcchronicles.org/>.

³ For more on HRSA Health Center Program Requirements, please visit <https://bphc.hrsa.gov/>.

⁴ For more information, see the *Governance Guide for Health Center Boards* at <https://www.healthcenterinfo.org/details/?id=2302>.

What makes health center board composition unique?

The HRSA Health Center Program requires health centers to have a consumer-majority governing board.⁵ **A high-level summary of health center board composition requirements follow; for specific requirements, refer to the [HRSA Health Center Program Compliance Manual](#).**

9-25

Health center boards must consist of at least **9** and no more than **25** members

At least
51%



At least **51%** of board members must be **patients** served by the health center

- A patient is an individual who has received at least one service in the past 24 months that generated a health center visit (see the [Health Center Program Compliance Manual](#) for details)
- Patient members, as a group, represent the individuals who are served by the health center in terms of demographic factors, such as race, ethnicity, and gender

Up to
49%



Up to **49%** of board members can be **non-patients**

- Non-patient members are representative of the community served by the health center or the health center’s service area, and are selected to provide relevant expertise and skills

⁵ For specific requirements, please see the HRSA Health Center Program Compliance Manual, Chapter 20: Board Composition at <https://bphc.hrsa.gov/programrequirements/compliancemanual/chapter-20.html#titletop>.

What benefits does health center board structure provide to health centers?

Health center board members provide a vital link to the community and help build the community's trust in the center

“As a vital link between their health center and the...community, consumer board members often bring about positive solutions to health center challenges.”

–Yvonne Davis, Board Member, Health Care Partners of South Carolina as quoted in *Community Health Forum* (Spring 2015)

“What sets us apart in the business of healthcare is the true representative voice of the very people we serve on our governing body... directed by the community for the community means that everyone has a seat at the table.”

–Kim Schwartz, CEO, Roanoke Chowan Community Health Center

“Consumer board members...help to build the community's trust in the health center...This has been the main ingredient to the success of our health centers...and will continue to be essential in the future.”

–Michael Wurtsmith, Board Member, Thunder Bay Community Health Centers

The requirement that a health center board be composed of health center patients and other members of the community selected for particular expertise yields a number of unique benefits. Health center boards are uniquely positioned to ensure health center services are specific to the needs of the communities and people served. The following themes emerged when some health center board members and chief executive officers were asked about the benefits of the health center board structure.

Consumer board members are often the first to identify the needs of the community and challenges in accessing care

“The secret to the success of health centers is being embedded and interconnected to the communities we serve. The only way to achieve that deep personal connection with our communities is to have our health centers overseen and guided by members of our communities who actually use the health center... Instead of telling our patients what would help them, we partner with them and ask them, “what would help?” and then deeply listen.”

–Jonathan Lee, President & CEO, Signature Health

“With 51% of board members being patients ... the voice of consumers...bring a unique perspective of the community and the patients it serves...”

–Virginia (Ginger) Fuata, Board Member, Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health

“Consumer board members are often the first to identify problems community residents encounter in accessing healthcare....”

–Michael Wurtsmith, Board Member, Thunder Bay Community Health Centers

Health center board members ensure a focus on both accountability and mission

“The patient-majority governance model is essential and innovative in its nature...Decisions as a patient can connect accountability and compassion in a meaningful way.”

–Steven Sera, Board Chair, MHC Healthcare

“The ...patient majority governance model ensures that a majority of board members... entrust their personal and/or family health care to the organization they serve; not only is this a manifestation of trust in the health center... but also provides a majority of the board with a ground level perspective of how well the health center is fulfilling its patient driven mission.”

–Margaret Brennan, former President and CEO, Community Health Centers