

COVID-19 Stories

The Power of Lived Experience: Community Outreach for Minnesota's COVID-19 Testing

Setting up community testing

When COVID-19 arrived in Minnesota, testing opportunities were limited. Only people with symptoms could get tested at clinics and hospitals and everyone was asked for insurance. This left many Minnesotans without access to COVID-19 testing. Seeing this deficit, the Governor's Office and Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) partnered with diagnostic testing companies and community organizations to open community testing sites all over the state. Community testing sites are located at nonclinical locations, often in trusted community spaces such as churches or community centers. People do not need to have symptoms to be tested, and they do not have to have insurance or show identification. For these reasons, community testing is considered "no barrier," and helps ensure that COVID-19 testing is accessible to all Minnesotans.

The first wave of free community testing sponsored by MDH came in June, following the murder of George Floyd. As justice seekers and mourners took to the streets, MDH worried about the implications these community gatherings would have on COVID-19 case numbers. To address this potential problem, MDH, the Governor's Office, and community partners collaborated to set up the first testing sites at four community locations across the Twin Cities.

After the success of these initial sites, MDH looked to widespread community testing as a part of the solution to prevent the spread of COVID-19. While the quick set up was a challenge, ensuring that the sites were accessible and safe for communities who needed them most was an even bigger one. Dai Vu, the Community Liaison lead, says, "In the beginning, the communities that really needed testing did not show up, even when the testing was directly in those communities, because of a lack of outreach." After witnessing the low initial community turnout at testing events, MDH's Community Liaisons saw the need for more connection to the people they were trying to reach. They recognized that building trust with diverse communities hesitant to get tested was a key part of helping stop the spread.

Combining lived experience with public health work

Since the beginning, MDH Community Liaisons have been at the forefront of the community testing work in the Twin Cities metro area. They have helped with volunteer engagement, outreach, and registration. But, more importantly, Community Liaisons have brought their own lived experience and understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic to their work. A large part of encouraging community members to get tested is creating a space that is comfortable and safe. When Community Liaisons and the community-based organizations they work with are able to greet community members in their native language and be a friendly face among a sea of strangers, it creates a welcoming and safe testing experience and encourages people to come back, if needed. “We are MDH employees, but first and foremost, we are members of the communities we represent,” says Betty Hiller, one of the African American Community Liaisons.

The importance of outreach

Throughout the community testing events, partnership has been crucial. MDH Community Liaisons have worked with local public health departments to promote testing events and share information with underrepresented communities. They have also conducted interviews and appeared on local radio stations to get the word out about testing.

Claudia Fuentes, an outreach coordinator, recalls her time engaging community members for testing in Plainview, Minn. “We had to really figure out who had boots on the ground and could mobilize forces,” she says. In this case, Fuentes worked directly with the Plainview local public health office to engage the Latinx and other underserved communities, and together, they identified mobile home communities and Latinx-owned businesses where she could make an impact. As Plainview did not have a Latinx public health worker, she personally stepped in to help provide a culturally responsive and tailored plan.

She printed out flyers, drove down to Plainview to post them by mailboxes, and went door-to-door at the mobile home communities. At each home that answered her knock, she asked people to take a photo of the testing flyers and post it on Facebook, which is the main way that some members of the mobile home community receive local news. Fuentes then worked with Latinx owners of local businesses to post testing flyers in their shops and to have employees share testing information with their friends and families. When testing day rolled around, the

Latinx community turned out because they had seen the messages about community testing shared by people they knew and trusted.

Fuentes continues to provide outreach and support to testing teams both in the Metro and Greater Minnesota. One challenge she notes is that many community members will say, “[They] feel fine and do not need to get tested. Part of disseminating the message is also disseminating facts and dispelling myths and misinformation in a culturally meaningful way [about COVID-19].”

Looking forward

Since the initial pop-ups, community testing has grown and transformed. Community Liaison outreach has successfully connected with underrepresented populations and created a safe and welcoming environment at testing events. With every new testing event, Community Liaisons have learned a little bit more about partnerships and how to connect with people from all walks of life. While data have shown that communities of color and American Indians are coming to these testing events, challenges do remain. “There are still pockets of the community that are still fearful,” Dai Vu says, and “communities [that are] still asking for testing sites.” As testing continues to evolve and the Minnesota winter sets in, Community Liaisons will adjust their outreach as needed. Strategies may continue to change, but the team remains committed to developing new relationships and strategies that resonate with all Minnesotans.