

State announces partnership with health plans to improve COVID-19 vaccine equity

Partnership will leverage existing work to expand access to vaccines for those most impacted by COVID-19

The State of Minnesota is partnering with Minnesota health plans to improve COVID-19 vaccine equity and access. Starting next week, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) will work with private health plans to identify Minnesotans who have been most impacted by COVID-19 and continue to face barriers to getting vaccinated to connect them with vaccination opportunities.

Participating health plans starting this work next week include Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, HealthPartners, Hennepin Health, Itasca Medical Care, Medica, PreferredOne, PrimeWest Health, South Country Health Alliance, and UCare.

“Immunizing for impact requires us to measure our success not only by how fast we are able to get the most Minnesotans vaccinated but also by how we are reaching communities at highest risk for COVID-19 who have already been hardest hit by the pandemic,” said Dr. Nathan Chomilo, COVID-19 vaccine equity director for MDH and Medicaid medical director for DHS. “Our Minnesota health plans have found unique ways to support their members’ and communities’ health and this partnership will allow all of us to expand our resources, coordinate efforts to get more Minnesotans connected to lifesaving vaccines and continue to build a more just and community-driven approach to health.”

The partnership program will work to reach Minnesotans enrolled in Minnesota Health Care Programs (MHCPs), such as Medical Assistance (MA) and MinnesotaCare, who live in ZIP codes with high social vulnerability index (SVI) scores and have not been vaccinated for COVID-19. The health plans will work with the state to contact members and provide information on vaccination, assist with scheduling appointments and help plan for their vaccination, including arranging transportation or other services, if needed.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota recently conducted a two-week pilot for the program using text message outreach that contributed to a dramatic increase in walk-in appointments—six times higher than normal within a week following the text campaign.

“This commitment to vaccinate the most at-risk populations will not only go a long way toward beating back COVID-19, but help us close other health disparities that are far too prevalent in Minnesota,” said Lucas Nesse, president and CEO of the Minnesota Council of Health Plans. “Minnesota’s health plans are continually looking for strategies to best reach vulnerable communities, and we look forward to working with the state on this critical initiative.”

“It takes local partnering and responsiveness to effectively address care inequities,” said Steve Gottwalt, executive director of Minnesota Association of County Health Plans. “Our county-based plans continue working to improve vaccination rates among communities most impacted by COVID-19 and who still face barriers. This partnership with the Departments of Health and Human Services helps us target those efforts and measure progress.”

An analysis done last year by the State Health Access Data Assistance Center of 2018 data showed that approximately 44% of African American, 39% of Native American, 31% of Hispanic and 20% of Asian Minnesotans under the age of 65 rely on MHCPs for health care coverage. MHCP coverage for African American, Native American and white Minnesotans is higher outside the seven-county metro area. Additionally, more than 100,000 Minnesotans with disabilities and their families rely on MHCPs and face additional barriers to accessing routine care and services. Participating health plans will have the support of state agencies to reach out to members in BIPOC communities as well as those living in areas with higher SVI scores, which have been shown to be at increased risk for COVID-19 outbreaks.

MDH uses SVI scores and other metrics to inform more equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and decrease the likelihood of future outbreaks among communities already hit the hardest. The focused efforts by the participating health plans will help make sure people living in these areas not only know how and where they can be vaccinated, but reduce any barriers preventing them from accessing a vaccine.

“Given the structural and societal barriers MHCP enrollees faced in accessing care even before the pandemic, this partnership is a recognition that we need to continue to go the extra mile and rebuild trust with the communities we serve and help mitigate further inequities in access,” said Dr. Chomilo.