

Pairing Community Wisdom with Access to Institutions: The Importance of the LGBTQ Community Liaisons

Recognizing intersectionality

MDH is dedicated to serving all Minnesotans, and that means addressing health equity. The LGBTQ community faces unique challenges as it intersects with several communities that experience similar inequities. “The LGBTQ community is also African American, American Indian, refugees and immigrants, and more,” said Mattie Jensen, LGBTQ Community Liaison at MDH.

Jensen and Shor Salkas make up the LGBTQ community liaison team at MDH. Their role is to connect with LGBTQ community members to ensure that they have access to education and information about COVID-19 prevention, testing and care, and to provide an open line of communication for them to share concerns and requests with MDH. Our liaisons have been flexible and responsive to community needs during the changing pandemic. They collaborate with local organizations, speak at events and conferences, answer community members’ questions, and advocate internally at MDH for the needs of the LGBTQ community.

For Jensen and Salkas, this work is personal; their friend and family networks have been key to getting this work done. As leaders in their communities, the line between work and personal lives has blurred, but the common thread has been a fervent desire to keep their communities safe during this time. “I feel like I’m texting people all the time or on Facebook,” Salkas explained. “I am always communicating with people about COVID-19 in the community.” Because of their passionate work, the LGBTQ community has had access to an additional trusted source of information to stay safe during the pandemic.

While the LGBTQ community faces many of the same obstacles that others experiencing health inequities do, some concerns are especially challenging. “While social isolation is happening to all people who are practicing Stay Safe precautions, for LGBTQ people this is particularly difficult because they might have chosen families that they may not live with. If you live in a home with people who are not supportive of your identities or where you do not feel connected,

this isolation is deeply felt,” said Jensen. In addition, LGBTQ elders are experiencing barriers to health and wellbeing because they may not have supportive extended families or feel safe in elder care environments.

Connecting and sharing

One of the ways that the LGBTQ community liaison team opened conversations and brought resources to community was through biweekly open calls in partnership with the City of Minneapolis this past spring and summer. The calls enabled state and city leaders to share vital information with the LGBTQ community while also bringing in trusted leaders on different topics to share with the community members. Salkas said, “We needed a place to see each other and talk about these things because they were changing so fast. There was a need for connection more broadly, so we started bringing people together for information and updates.” A key aspect was open dialogue and creating a place with two-way resource sharing and problem-solving, in real time. The LGBTQ community was eager to participate. Jensen recalled, “Everybody we reached out to [for panel discussions] said yes. Everyone was really eager to show up for each other. Everyone wanted to make time for it. That was really beautiful.”

Track Trachtenberg, Trans Equity Project Coordinator with the City of Minneapolis, was a key partner in this work. They said, “I’ve definitely appreciated working with Shor and Mattie, and getting access to updated COVID information that they could provide.”

Challenges still remain with reaching all community members. Trachtenberg shared, “Although we were reasonably successful in reaching a diverse group of service providers, often leaders at local organizations, and although we were successful at developing diverse panels of subject matter experts in various areas, we were often not reaching community members directly unless they were organization-affiliated.”

Reaching as many people as possible requires strong collaboration with trusted community messengers. Jensen and Salkas worked with community contractors and leading organizations in the community to leverage their connections and local wisdom. “I cannot stress enough how important it is that information come from trusted community sources,” Jensen said. “They have a better idea of what is going on in the community. They can be more nimble and flexible.”

Advocacy and positive change

The LGBTQ community liaison team has also served as advocates for increasing inclusion and equity across the MDH COVID-19 response. Jensen's and Salkas's efforts have resulted in the beginnings of sexual orientation and gender identity data collection at community testing sites and during case interviews. As part of this work, they led trainings to educate case interviewers on the best ways to collect these data and how to respond if an interviewee expresses concerns about the questions. Jensen and Salkas have also remained available for case interviewers to reach with any additional questions on an ongoing basis. This work is crucial to being able to track and monitor the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on LGBTQ communities. Without the data, the only way to know what is happening is through anecdotal evidence and stories. The team is also creating a guide for testing site workers to ensure that they are providing a safe, welcoming, truly barrier-free environment for all Minnesotans who come for COVID-19 testing.

Salkas and Jensen have been repeatedly recognized by their MDH colleagues as key leaders, and they continually push for equity internally at MDH. They continue to work alongside community leaders to ensure that the needs of the LGBTQ community are met during the COVID-19 pandemic.