

Phyllis Wheatley: A cornerstone for COVID-19 support in the community

Since its founding, Phyllis Wheatley Community Center has been a safe haven for the African American community. African American civic leaders, educators, entertainers, and students have walked through the organization's door to this home-away-from-home. Today, Phyllis Wheatley continues to provide education and skill-building opportunities to help people and families in the African American community. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, Phyllis Wheatley knew that it would be a cornerstone during the COVID-19 response due to its longstanding relationship with the community.

For nearly a year now, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) has partnered with Phyllis Wheatley to create and share culturally relevant COVID-19 education messages and materials and connect community members to needed resources within the African American community—one of the communities most impacted by COVID-19, inequities, and systemic racism. Joanna Schlegelmilch, the lead at Phyllis Wheatley on their COVID-19 Community Coordinator (CCC) contract with MDH, noted that the area of North Minneapolis served by the organization was one hit hard by COVID-19.

A constant cornerstone of support

At the beginning of the pandemic, Phyllis Wheatley started hosting testing events as well as connecting community members with basic resources such as housing and food assistance through its COVID-19 Hotline as part of the CCC initiative. In 2021, when COVID-19 vaccines were more plentiful, Phyllis Wheatley transitioned to supporting vaccination clinics. They registered community members for vaccination or helped them find accessible locations to get vaccinated.

Through community engagement and outreach, Phyllis Wheatley staff heard whispers that misinformation was spreading in the community. In order to better understand the misinformation and have an opportunity to correct it, Phyllis Wheatley expanded its COVID-19 operations from their hotline number to also include door-knocking. Schlegelmilch explained the addition, saying they had to “make sure to have a conversation around the vaccine, to make sure [people] were able to make an informed decision.”

Door-knocking provided the opportunity to directly engage with the community, proving especially important for community members without access to technology. Technology challenges were “a massive barrier,” recalled Schlegelmilch, and “many were not able to access assistance.” With Phyllis Wheatley’s new community engagement strategy, outreach specialist teams went door-to-door through the neighborhood and sat down with community members, sometimes “on their front porch, and helped them fill out the forms.” The outreach specialist teams would then provide contact information to their hotline if food or housing support was also needed, and hotline teams would follow up. This new system helped many community members overcome the technology barriers that were exacerbated by COVID-19.

Success in partnership and community

Through the pandemic, Phyllis Wheatley has been able to shift projects to meet people where they are at. “People are dealing with more immediate crises,” said Schlegelmilch. As such, the organization’s top priority has been to help people access housing or food support in addition to COVID-19 testing and vaccination. Phyllis Wheatley has leaned on its partnerships with other community organizations to make sure that they are showing up for the community in the way the community needs. It currently collaborates with The Power of People Leadership Institute and Second Chance Coalition to help increase vaccine confidence. Schlegelmilch also mentioned that working with MDH has been “wonderful and MDH [has been] very responsive to all their needs.”

Yet some challenges remain with community engagement. Schlegelmilch notes that “it has been difficult to [carry out] because of gun violence and general violence in the neighborhoods,” making it more difficult to go door-knocking and reach community members in their neighborhoods. Staff continue to engage with the community when they are able, as Phyllis Wheatley has seen the difference that this form of community outreach makes.

Down the road with COVID-19

Phyllis Wheatley knows that COVID-19 is not over, and for their community, getting people vaccinated and continuing education on masking and testing is still a priority. As of September 2021, a little over half of the Black and African American community over 12 years of age are fully vaccinated, leaving a significant part of the community unprotected. Phyllis Wheatley is in

the process of setting up recurring vaccination and testing events so that community members know they can show up and walk in for either a vaccination or COVID-19 test at regular times. Two exciting projects that Phyllis Wheatley has been looking into are new “mobile vaccine teams where medical teams go out to community events” and sending COVID-19 test kits home with kids at school to get the whole family tested for COVID-19. Phyllis Wheatley continues to prioritize meeting people where they are at and removing as many barriers to COVID-19 testing and vaccination as they can.