

COVID-19 Stories: A Peek into Community Testing: Equity, Partnership, and a Voice at the Table

The initial decision process

When COVID-19 hit, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) set up an organizational structure called incident command system (ICS) dedicated to the COVID-19 emergency response. Part of the ICS structure includes community liaisons to help Minnesota communities hardest hit by COVID-19 access resources such as no-barrier COVID-19 community testing and culturally relevant, accurate information about COVID-19 from trusted sources.

The African American community liaisons realized quickly that their community needed no-barrier COVID-19 testing at trusted community hubs, with tailored outreach. These no-barrier community testing events provide testing at no cost and do not ask for health insurance or identification. The liaison team, comprised of Betty Hiller, Helen Jackson Lockett-EI, Sandy Johnson, and Benita Robinson, began planning in June 2020. The addition of Sabrenia Young, an African American community engagement specialist, to the State Emergency Operations Testing Team was critical in bringing the African American community's voice to the testing conversation. It took months of analyzing data, pushing for equity in the testing event planning process, and advocating for community voices to be heard to finally get approval to host testing sites.

Community inclusion

Dai Vu, the community liaison team lead, and Benita Robinson co-led the June New Salem community testing events. Each brought strengths to the team: Vu, with her extensive work in community engagement, and Robinson, with her lived experience and leadership in the African American community. They knew that everyone involved in the testing events would need to work together to make the community feel represented and included. This was their first priority in setting up community testing events.

“Partnering with Stairstep - His Works United, one of our contractors, was a natural decision,” said Sandy Johnson. As a trusted foundation rooted in the African American community, Stairstep had previously provided free flu shots to community members. According to Robinson,

Stairstep “has a pulse on the community and relationships with 70-plus churches.” MDH worked closely with the founder, president, and CEO of Stairstep Foundation, Reverend Alfred Babington-Johnson. His expertise and connections were key in identifying churches willing and able to host COVID-19 community testing events and recruiting volunteers to assist in the planning and implementation process. For MDH, recognizing this invaluable partnership was critical, so they worked with Stairstep to compensate volunteers for their time.

Set up and promotion

The African American community liaisons worked hard to weave community inclusion throughout the Stairstep testing events. One of their goals was to make sure that even though MDH sponsored the events, community members were the face of them. In addition to working with Reverend Babington-Johnson, they advocated for a state partnership with Black Nurses Rock to bring nurses from the African American community in to collect nasal swab samples at these testing events. The community liaison team also participated in local news interviews and reached out to KMOJ, a local radio channel that is a trusted resource in the African American community, to help spread the word about these testing events. Freddie Bell, general manager of KMOJ, remembers that he “received regular phone calls or emails from Sandy [Johnson] calling our attention to testing opportunities. Typically these notices to KMOJ were sometimes a couple of days ahead which gave the community liaisons time to work the information sharing into KMOJ’s program schedule for broadcasting.” Chaz Millionaire, a radio personality from KMOJ, was also instrumental in getting the word out to the community on his radio show and Facebook Live page regarding free COVID-19 testing. He personally attended the New Salem, Mt. Olivet, and United COGIC events. At each of these, Millionaire videoed himself being tested to show the community there was nothing to fear. Similarly, church leaders like Reverend Babington-Johnson also led the way by lining up and getting tested on camera to lessen the stigma and fear of COVID-19 testing.

The versatility and flexibility of this outreach process allowed the team to engage the African American community more deeply. This flexibility extended not just to outreach, but also to the testing setup. Lived experience had shown the African American liaisons that having different testing options is important to the community. The MDH testing team responded by offering

walk-in appointments, the ability to drive up and get tested from the car, and other testing options.

Putting the community first

Stairstep's testing events put community needs first and prioritized community involvement. Bell recalls that the testing events "were an incredible success and gave KMOJ a chance to see our listeners, face to face, at many of these events."

In October, Stairstep and MDH planned testing events at four different churches for a total of eight days of testing in the African American community. Every step of the way, Vu and the African American community liaison team advocated for actions that would help community members feel safe and comfortable. They also continued to strengthen existing relationships and foster new ones. Robinson is very proud that this work has "opened new doors and new levels of conversation and engagement" and that "people are compensated for their gifts, talents, and work."

Looking beyond COVID-19

"What will happen after COVID-19?" is a sentiment echoed among the community liaisons. While they all hope that COVID-19 will be over soon, they worry about things going back to "business as usual." Vu hopes that "relationships stay and continue [since] everything that we do is to offset the mistrust and challenges that we see from the community." Sandy Johnson reiterates that it is important to be culturally responsive, respectful, and considerate to all communities. She hopes that the community liaison model will remain even after COVID-19, and that MDH will continue this engagement and relationship-building process with Minnesota's diverse communities.

For now, the work to slow the spread of COVID-19 continues.