

COVID-19 Stories: MDH Forges a New Model of Community Partnership

COVID-19 highlights need for more community partnerships

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) has prioritized sharing accurate information with Minnesotans on how to keep themselves and their families safe. This messaging includes topics ranging from wearing masks, to getting tested for COVID-19, to how to seek medical care. Because these messages can sometimes change quickly due to the rapidly evolving nature of the crisis, it has been vitally important to have adaptive and responsive communications systems in place that reach all Minnesotans.

Early in the COVID-19 response, experienced community engagement professionals at MDH identified the need to work with trusted community sources to ensure that all Minnesotans receive critical information in a timely manner. Community members and public health professionals alike agree on the importance of translated health messages with culturally relevant images. “Throughout our diverse communities in Minnesota, we all have different preferences for where we get our trusted information or our health information. We have different linguistic needs and we perceive messages in different ways, depending on our cultures and our backgrounds,” shared Bridget Pouladian, leader of the Contracts Team of the Cultural, Faith, and Disabilities Branch of the MDH COVID-19 Response. “We really needed to work with trusted community partners to make sure that the COVID-19 messages that were so important for communities to hear and understand were culturally relevant, linguistically appropriate, accurate, and timely.”

These principles inspired the Cultural, Faith, and Disabilities Communities Branch of the MDH COVID-19 response to build a process for contracting with trusted diverse media vendors and community-based organizations, in order to create and share culturally-relevant COVID-19 education messages and materials. This program has had a wide reach across diverse communities in Minnesota and has proved to be a mutually valuable model for community engagement.

So far this year, as part of the COVID-19 public health response, MDH has partnered with more than 120 diverse media vendors and community-based organizations to engage people about

health messaging as part of the COVID-19 public health response. These organizations are tasked with ensuring that all people residing in Minnesota and the 11 Tribal Nations that share its geography — including residents from communities of color, American Indian residents, LGBTQ residents, and residents with limited English proficiency — have access to accurate messages about COVID-19. Because of their existing relationships with and intimate knowledge of the communities they serve, these organizations are able to provide trusted, timely, and culturally-relevant health information to diverse communities across the state. Ensuring access to these messages is especially critical for these communities because data has shown the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color and American Indians.

The community engagement model

The partnership between MDH and the community contractors extends beyond funding. Each community-based organization or diverse media vendor is partnered with a contract manager at MDH to ensure they always have a responsive entry point into the department. The contract manager works collaboratively with MDH community liaisons to provide a direct line of communication to and from the MDH COVID-19 response efforts, support the development of communications materials, and respond to questions and concerns from their communities.

The dedication to two-way communication and collaboration in these contracts has proved to be an effective and collaborative model that both MDH staff and contractors are eager to replicate even beyond the COVID-19 response. Each contractor has met virtually with their contract manager and community liaison in a small group of other contractors from their cultural community either weekly or biweekly to discuss their progress toward goals, their community's needs, and their questions of MDH. These frequent, conversational touch points have provided an opportunity for relationship-building with communities often marginalized by government, and for community voices to have a direct pathway into the COVID-19 response.

Julie Dalton, a contract manager for community contractors at MDH, noted that this approach to contracting has allowed for valuable communication between MDH and community partners, as well as proactive problem solving rather than reactive responses. For the first few months of her reassignment to the COVID-19 response, Julie worked closely with American Indian community contractors. As their contract manager, she met weekly in a small, virtual group with contractors

from the American Indian community and the MDH American Indian community liaison, Kathy Denman-Wilke, to provide updates and hold discussions. “Every week they had the opportunity to share challenges and successes, and they were able to problem solve and share resources together,” shared Julie. After each call, Julie and Kathy took back their concerns to their colleagues within the department, and found solutions to resolve them by working with staff across the agency. They worked together to ensure a quick response time for addressing community concerns.

While the model has been successful in many ways, one of the biggest challenges with this approach has been balancing the time commitments of MDH staff assigned to this work. The contract managers team faces significant turnover as MDH staff are rotated on and off the COVID-19 response in order to keep up with their normal work duties. Nevertheless, the contracts and community liaisons teams have invested their efforts in ensuring as much consistency and relationship-building as possible with community contractors, even amid staffing changes.

Continuing the impact

With over \$4 million in funding altogether thus far, community contractors have pursued a variety of methods to reach communities with key messages about COVID-19, ranging from traditional health messaging to beautiful artwork to funny videos. The messages are distributed through radio, television, social media, newspapers, and more. Community knowledge and wisdom is key to effective messaging, and these organizations are well positioned to bring that insight. Bhutan Community Organization of Minnesota, a COVID-19 community contractor, believes in the power of community-centered health messaging. “During this COVID-19 pandemic, we have experienced that the message or any kind of information can be reached to the grassroots level of the community when the local community organizations are involved,” the organization shared.

As of August 2020, community contractors reported providing direct COVID-19 information or services to over 25,000 community members combined. This work included over 50 unique printed communications, 250 online communications, and 20 radio or TV broadcasts. Social media messages amassed over 12 million views. Some examples of both community and

diverse media contractors' work can be found on [COVID-19 Examples of Contractor Materials and Messages](#).

Contractors have also viewed this approach as beneficial. The directors of Black Family Blueprint, one of the diverse media contractors, noted: "We encourage MDH to continue with this method to find trustworthy and authentic partners within the community to convert pertinent information to respective communities...This is a vitally important notion because effective community partnerships exist with the realm of autonomous accountability and trustworthy support."

Partnering with trusted community organizations to reach Minnesotans with important messaging around COVID-19 has been a success that both MDH staff and community organizations hope to see continued. 3HmongTV, a diverse media contractor, shared: "Our relationship with MDH and the important work that we provide to communities of color is so important. The trust between government and diverse communities is by working together on issues and letting them know that we all care about all people, not excluding anyone in the state of Minnesota."