

COVID-19 Stories: Reflecting on a Year of COVID-19 with the MDH Latinx Community Liaison Team

The need for engagement

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 where to find a COVID-19 vaccine. 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 in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways.

Successful public health partnerships

For the Latinx community, a significant part of MDH's response has been orchestrated by its Latinx Community Liaison Team – Jeanett Garcia and Marcie Babcock, who co-lead the team, as well as Mateo Frumholtz, Margarita Ruiz, Marisol Chiclana-Ayala, and Sylvette Lopez-Ruth (pictured below). Throughout the last year, they have worked tirelessly to advocate for the Latinx community's needs during the COVID-19 response – quickly adapting, pivoting, and being creative to respond to shifting priorities when needed. When COVID-19 case data began showing increasing cases in the Latinx community last summer, the team pushed for and worked with community organizations serving the Latinx community to hold multiple community testing events. For Jeanett, one of their biggest successes was collaborating with faith-based leaders in Minnesota and the City of Minneapolis to hold COVID-19 testing events for the community at Sagrado Corazon, which led to a huge turnout from the community.

The team's top priority throughout the pandemic has been to engage their community and develop genuine and authentic relationships with partners and organizations serving the Latinx community. From the very beginning, the team, originally led by Marisol, conducted outreach to leaders across the state including government agencies, local public health, nonprofits, and other community-based organizations to share resources and discuss concerns in the Latinx

community at biweekly meetings. These meetings let the team continually look for ways to let community members' voices shine through MDH contracts and partnerships.

Continuing to connect the dots

Today, the team plays an important role in addressing vaccine concerns in the Latinx community. They provide a space to engage creatively and authentically with the community, especially those who do not have access to internet or social media. Of note, more than 82% of Latinx adults ages 45 to 64 have been vaccinated! However, there is still work left to do. Only 34% of Latinx community members between the ages of 15 and 44 are vaccinated.

The team and MDH's partners continue to look for ways to create a safe and comfortable environment for members of the community to get vaccinated, such as successfully advocating that no government identification or documentation should be required for COVID-19 testing or vaccination, and ensuring vaccination events are flexible in timing to accommodate community member's schedules. One sentiment repeatedly echoed by the team is "bringing vaccination sites to the community" and placing a large emphasis on creating a comfortable, safe, and trusted space for vaccination.

This last year has shown again and again the importance of authentically engaging with community partners and community members themselves. The team hopes that MDH will continue its commitment to authentic engagement and invest staff time to continue building and maintaining community relationships. While there is much to celebrate, the team also recognizes the work that can, and must, continue in order to protect the health of their community.