

COVID-19 Stories: An Outstanding Partnership: Reaching out to Greater Minnesota with COVID-19 Vaccination

Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) partnered with Briva Health Clinic; Islamic Association of North America (IANA); and African Career, Education & Resource (ACER) to host a pop-up vaccination site in St. Cloud. The organizations noticed there were concerns about vaccine from women and youth in the area. A previous series of vaccine clinics held at mosques and door knocking at apartment complexes reached the 65 and older age population but showed that "a lot of parents were reluctant to have their children vaccinated," said Aisha Galaydh, the African Immigrant COVID Community Coordinator (CCC) Lead. Hodan Guled, the Briva Health Clinic Program Director for COVID-19 response commented the "high hesitancy to vaccination across the different ethnic groups" made hosting the vaccine event in greater Minnesota imperative. Previously, the CCC organizations had rarely hosted vaccine events outside of the Metro area, where "there are more barriers to African immigrants in accessing social services and connecting with local public health," confirmed Galaydh. Through the meaningful partnership and collaboration of MDH with its various CCCs, community engagement and diverse media contractors, CentraCare hospital, and local public health (LPH), more than 200 people turned up to be vaccinated, which was a great surprise for the team!

Riding on existing partnership

MDH's African Immigrant Community Liaisons and their partners observed how working with existing partners and being intentional in planning, messaging, and outreach were important in encouraging women and youth to come for vaccination. The population in greater Minnesota consists of "newer immigrants and refugees [who are] disconnected with local public health," said Lensa Terfa, African Community Liaison team member. This meant strategizing on which contractors to work with and what "tailored messaging would look like for youth...and women," said Galaydh. Leveraging the existing relationship with LPH, the CCC used diverse media and Center for African Immigrants and Refugees Organization (CAIRO) to connect with other community partners to understand the needs on the ground and amplify their messaging.

Well-known and trusted by the community, Briva Health Clinic brought its Somali doctors, nurses, and volunteers to assist people with registration, vaccination, and to make them feel

safe. Tents were pitched outside with a doctor present to greet people and answer questions. Having health providers that look like the community, who were acquainted with the language and culture, was meaningful because people could relate to them "and help them understand — if they had questions about the vaccines," said Guled. During the vaccine event, African Community Liaison Okash Haybe witnessed one concerned mother later agreeing to have her 12-year-old son vaccinated after she engaged in a discussion with one of the Somali nurses on site.

Collaborative planning with partners

Several meetings were held with community partners to coordinate and share responsibilities for the vaccination event. Community engagement coordinators serving the African immigrant community, including CAIRO, Central Karen Fault, African Immigrant Community Services (AICS), IANA, and ACER, brought their knowledge of community needs and concerns. Briva Health Clinic, already connected to the Muslim community, helped to shed light on some of the barriers to vaccination among youths and women. The team also realized the importance of having "someone on the ground who does the work involved in the meetings," said Galaydh. Hani Jacobson, one of the CentraCare public health nurses who led COVID-19 vaccine and outreach, health, and education in the Somali community, shared this crucial perspective in the planning meetings.

"To increase vaccine turnout, IANA made weekly announcements about the event through email/text messages to the Somali Community and sent its two staff members to support the vaccine event in St. Cloud," said Abdiqafar A. Jama, the IANA Program Supervisor. All the contractors, worked together in tailoring messages to families, women, and children. Many of the community members who attended the vaccination event were from multigenerational households.

"Another thing that was helpful during the event was the \$100 incentives, given to those that completed their vaccine series," said Guled. Different social media platforms were used to promote the event and share videos of youth and women getting vaccinated. Information was also communicated through St. Cloud Somali Radio, Somali TV of Minnesota, Xogmaal Media, Xidig TV, Laari Media Group, Saint Cloud School District, and community events such as the

Annual Health Professional Conference. Flyers with faces of trusted Somali health professionals were designed and distributed. Delmar, a popular Somali celebrity, was also invited to the event to entertain the crowd with local music, while Somali TV of Minnesota captured the whole event. Previous and current CCC's like the Islamic Association of Northern American, an umbrella organization of 35 mosques, brought the news of the Briva Health vaccine event to mosques.

Reflecting back

Winfred Russell of ACER shared, "The reality of collaboration outside the cities, where you don't have a lot of MDH staff but have local public health staff, was different but unique." The vaccination event succeeded due to a community-driven model tapping into existing partnerships, community expertise, community knowledge, and the use of trusted health providers. "Each partner organization came with their own strengths to make it possible to vaccinate over 200 people in this vax event," concluded Jama.