

COVID-19 Stories

Partnering with the LGBTQ+ Community: Celebrating Pride during COVID-19

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) community have had long-standing health inequities made worse by the pandemic and is one of the focus communities in the Minnesota Department of Health's (MDH) equity work.

In the spring of 2021, MDH, in partnership with existing networks, joined the LGBTQ+ community to bring COVID-19 testing and vaccination to Pride festivals held in the Twin Cities and East Central Minnesota. Pride events are organized by the community to celebrate the self-affirmation, dignity, equality, and increased visibility of LGBTQ+ people. The events attracted more than 150,000 people, including youth and residents from urban and Greater Minnesota. In total, several testing and vaccination sites were organized at the events with thousands of people who came to be tested, vaccinated, or receive COVID-19 related information to make informed decisions.

Planning for the events

Pine County Health, City of Minneapolis, Rainbow Health, Blue Cross Blue Shield, and Hennepin Healthcare worked with MDH to provide COVID-19 testing and vaccination services in East Central Minnesota and the Twin Cities. Each organization had a different role, such as providing transportation, staffing, testing, vaccination, and health education. Other partners included local businesses, chambers of commerce, and vendors who provided services ranging from advertising, food, and environmental cleanliness.

Collaborating with partners

For Twin Cities Pride, Hennepin Healthcare provided vaccination staff and collected demographic data including sexual orientation and gender identity data using MDH's new registration form. This new form is an effort for MDH to better understand and equitably serve its communities with appropriate COVID-19 prevention and response programs. Blue Cross Blue Shield and the City of Minneapolis provided all three vaccines (Moderna, Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson). MDH produced outreach materials and promoted the events through community partners and social media in addition to providing the mobile vaccination bus and volunteers for health education.

At East Central Minnesota Pride, Pine County Health and Human Services worked with MDH's COVID Community Coordinator, Rainbow Health, to provide transportation, testing, and vaccination. "Being present and taking a leadership public health role was our greatest success during the event because we are known and trusted," said Krista Jensen, a health educator at Pine County Health and Human Services. To make vaccines as accessible as possible, people were vaccinated without prior registration.

A host of other partners also made the East Central Minnesota Pride event a success. The Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) organization provided funding and volunteers. Pine City Council for the Arts provided exhibit space for local film makers to exhibit their work. East Central Recycling Waste Management Group donated extra garbage barrels, while vendors provided food trucks. Collaborating with all these partners, including artists, paved a platform for community members to join and celebrate this event.

Creating a safe space

Allies, families, and individuals attended the Pride celebrations to support the unity, cohesion, and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ group as an integral part of community. The events attracted people from across the Midwest. Joining in this celebration were MDH Commissioner Jan Malcolm and ASL interpreter Nic Zapko who were designated as the Co-Grand Marshals for Twin Cities Pride. MDH LGBTQ+ Community Liaison Mattie Laidlaw recounted a story where one young person was encouraged to get vaccinated by a friend and their mother. They were able to get permission from their parent over the phone and got vaccinated that day.

East Central Minnesota Pride drew residents from the surrounding counties who felt that the location was more "convenient and welcoming for them to attend," Jensen commented. "There was a positive awakening in younger folks to express themselves without fear of their sexual or gender identity," said Shor Salkas, a previous MDH LGBTQ+ community liaison.

Future Pride events

This year, Minnesota will be celebrating its 50th anniversary of Pride events in several locations. East Central Minnesota Pride volunteer Valerie Mondor expressed how exciting it will be to partner with the University of Minnesota Jean Nickolaus Tretter Collection in exhibiting the unique history of LGBTQ+ people, organizations, and communities in Minnesota at the next East Central Minnesota Pride festival in 2022.

As [East Central Minnesota Pride](#) and [Twin Cities Pride](#) prepare for this year's celebrations, continued partnership and expanding collaboration are what they are focusing on. Salkas shared how working closely with media partners and local artists who attend the event is crucial to promoting and mobilizing more people to be vaccinated during the events to help protect themselves and their community from COVID-19.