

## COVID-19 Stories

### A Minnesota Story of Resiliency and Power: Black Nurses Rock

#### Champions for the community

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In January 2020, after one and a half years of preparation, Kelly Robinson founded the Minnesota chapter of Black Nurses Rock, Inc., a national organization established in 2014 focused on supporting Black nurses.

Then, the COVID-19 pandemic began, and many aspects of our lives came to a standstill. Nevertheless, Robinson knew that Black Nurses Rock's mission to inspire, empower, and educate the community was more essential than ever during this time. Not to be fazed, Robinson and her team of nurses partnered with the City of Minneapolis to pass out 4,000 masks and 500 bottles of hand sanitizer at community grassroots events. Often, these events popped up without prior marketing; Robinson recounted that she and her team were "literally driving the streets to places where organizers were providing food" to join their efforts and distribute their supply of masks and hand sanitizer to community members.

As spring transitioned into summer, Black Nurses Rock shifted their work from distributing masks and hand sanitizer to doing temperature checks at outdoor events to help keep community members from spreading COVID-19. In June, following the murder of George Floyd, Robinson and her team of nurses were the official temperature takers at his funeral. And as summer came to an end, Black Nurses Rock saw themselves at the center of another very important endeavor: the launch of community COVID-19 testing sites. Considering the possibility of higher rates of community spread following the anti-racism protests, vigils, and community support initiatives, the state of Minnesota, in conjunction with the Minnesota Department of Health, set up COVID-19 community testing sites. Black Nurses Rock was eager to partner in this work.

Always a champion of her community, Robinson connected with the state COVID-19 testing workgroup and advocated for more nurses of color to carry out the testing, to increase comfort and trust among community members coming out to get tested for COVID-19. From August through December 2020, Black Nurses Rock and MHealth were the official COVID-19 testers for community testing events hosted by Stairstep Foundation, a trusted organization in the African American community. These events had a broad reach in the African American community, offering a testing experience where providers were members of the community.

## A glimmer of hope: COVID-19 vaccines

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As Minnesota marked its one-year anniversary with COVID-19, the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines gained momentum. A few weeks ago, Robinson and her team were asked to help implement a vaccination program for Minnesotans 65 and older as well as K-12 educators. For six 10-hour days, the Black Nurses Rock team gave out over 5,000 vaccinations at two locations in the Twin Cities. The long days were worth it: Robinson said that “people were excited [for their vaccinations] and they all showed up.”

For Robinson, it is all about ensuring that people residing in communities that traditionally do not have easy health care access are prioritized in the vaccine distribution process and that vaccination sites are brought to these communities. “Even if a vaccination site is only twenty blocks away, for elderly people that do not have a car or access to public transportation, that distance is nearly impossible to travel on foot,” she explained. She hopes that as more vaccine becomes available, there will be a more intentional focus on equity.

## Addressing hesitancy and building trust

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Though COVID-19 testing and vaccination have kept Robinson and her team busy, Black Nurses Rock has still prioritized building trust and addressing vaccine hesitancy with community members. Robinson recently participated in a roundtable discussion with leaders from several different churches, emphasizing the importance of having prior positive relationships and continuing to show up for the communities to establish trust. She shared that the clergy were “comfortable asking [her] questions that they otherwise wouldn’t have been comfortable asking [anyone else].”

These channels of communication are crucial to conveying accurate information to community members who may be experiencing vaccine hesitancy. Questions and concerns surrounding vaccines are particularly prevalent in Minnesota’s communities of color, due to the long history of trauma and abuse from the medical and public health community. For instance, Robinson noted that some “people are fearful that there wasn’t enough testing” of the vaccines, or “that the vaccine is under emergency use authorization.” In the African American community, Robinson said that many “believe this will be another Tuskegee study.” Recently, Robinson received her COVID-19 vaccine and continues to share her experience and thoughts with the community. She hopes that with time, the African American community will see that everyone

around the world is receiving the COVID-19 vaccine and that the vaccine is “not targeted at the African American community to do harm.” She hopes that community members will believe that “this vaccine will save your life.” Robinson’s advocacy and the powerful work of Black Nurses Rock is a strong step toward fostering trust in the COVID-19 vaccine in the African American community – and ultimately, toward ending the pandemic.