

## A Tale of COVID-19 Testing in Two Cities: State, local, and community partnership

### A clear need

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When COVID-19 cases first arrived in Minnesota, Mateo Frumholtz, an epidemiologist at the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), jumped in to volunteer on the weekends fielding hotline calls and helping with contact tracing and case investigation. He began to notice increasing numbers of cases in Spanish-speaking communities as well as outbreaks at food manufacturing and processing plants where many workers are members of the Latinx community. It was “clear there was a need for more infrastructure for language services to help support and engage the [Latinx] community,” Frumholtz said.

One specific community experiencing COVID-19 outbreaks was Watonwan County. Naomi Ochsendorf, Watonwan County’s Human Services Director, recalled that she “saw spikes in the COVID-19 case data late summer, particularly from our food plants.” Ochsendorf started “immediately having conversations with the food plant leadership and epidemiologists to address the high levels of COVID-19 spread.” It was not long before Watonwan County decided to hold community testing events at Madelia and St. James, two cities in Watonwan County just 20 minutes apart from each other.

As there was no existing infrastructure for large-scale testing in Watonwan County, Ochsendorf reached out to MDH, where Frumholtz and Marisol Chiclana-Ayala were working to stand up a team internally under the Cultural, Faith, and Disability Communities Branch to serve the Latinx/Hispanic community and bring their concerns to the forefront of MDH. Together they looked to the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) for support in setting up COVID-19 testing sites in Watonwan County. At the time, the SEOC had already been hosting community testing events, but were having difficulty encouraging their communities of focus to come get tested. Ochsendorf, Frumholtz, and Chiclana-Ayala knew that the community engagement approach to the Madelia and St. James community testing sites needed to be different from what was already being done.

### A collaborative organizing effort

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From the very beginning, the Madelia and St. James testing events were community focused and driven. Chiclana-Ayala noted that even before the testing events, the MDH team had begun to “build genuine relationships and engage authentically with organizations working with Latinx/Hispanic communities statewide.” These organizations include Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio (CLUES), Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment Through Research (HACER), and Casa de Esperanza. Through these existing relationships, Chiclana-Ayala and Frumholtz were connected to Convivencia Hispana, an organization serving the Latinx community in Watonwan County.

As luck would have it, Convivencia Hispana and Watonwan County local public health already had a long-standing relationship. Ochsendorf said, “Watonwan County’s local public health had been working with Convivencia Hispana since the birth of the organization and many of their staff sit on each other’s boards.” With an existing relationship between Convivencia Hispana and local public health, MDH stepped in to offer the final missing piece: ensuring the logistics of the testing events would run smoothly. MDH and the SEOC coordinated with the food processing plants to make sure testing sites would be open during times when shifts were changing, ensure the sites were accessible to community members, and reduce barriers to testing for the Latinx community.

#### Relationships ensure success

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“Watonwan public health and Convivencia Hispana were essential to the success of the two testing events,” Frumholtz stated. Local public health and Convivencia Hispana worked tirelessly to engage the community and encourage them to come get tested. “They even gave out their own phone numbers so people in the community could call them for COVID-19 testing registration,” Ochsendorf said. Chiclana-Ayala observed, “Community members called to register only because trusted community leaders asked them to call. We were so lucky that we met community leaders in Madelia and St. James that believed in us and backed us up. They chose to work with us, and we were so lucky to have that opportunity.”

While there were definitely hectic moments putting together the testing events, Frumholtz emphasized that because of existing stakeholder relationships, “the challenges we faced were not as burdensome once they were able to overcome the first trust barrier.” Because of the wonderful relationships and robust systems already in place, the Madelia and St. James testing events were a huge success, with many members of the local Latinx community coming out to

get tested. More than a third of people tested in St. James were from the Latinx community, and almost half of the people tested in Madelia were from the Latinx community, compared to previous events where fewer than 8% of people tested were from the Latinx community.

The Madelia and St. James community testing events demonstrated the strength and necessity of community partnerships and local public health in reaching our diverse communities. This model has continued in Watonwan County for COVID-19 vaccination: Ochsendorf reported that the relationships local public health has built with the community have been extremely helpful in creating a safe and welcoming space for community members coming in to get vaccinated.