

COVID-19 Stories

Amplifying the Message: Integrating Art and Public Health to Protect the American Indian Community

Identifying an opportunity for partnership

Nationally, American Indians have experienced disproportionate rates of hospitalization and death due to COVID-19. For American Indian communities in Minnesota, sharing accurate and timely information about COVID-19 has been essential. American Indian Community Housing Organization (AICHO), headquartered in Duluth, has partnered with the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) for nearly a year as a community engagement contractor and most recently as a COVID-19 Community Coordinator. They have been leaders in consistently providing a broad range of social services, including food distributions for those impacted by COVID-19, and accurate and timely messaging on how to stay safe during COVID-19 to American Indian Minnesotans and all community members. Most importantly, their outreach method prioritizes messages that are designed to resonate specifically with American Indians.

As Art, Culture & Communications Coordinator at AICHO, Ivy Vainio has led these efforts to provide culturally tailored COVID-19 education messages to her community. Ivy is always on the lookout for new ways to educate the community on the importance of COVID-19 safety steps such as wearing a mask, washing hands and keeping physical distance. Recently, Ivy learned that Carlton County was doing a billboard project with the Fond Du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa focused on highlighting leaders in the American Indian community. Ivy reached out to see if AICHO could partner with them on this project by bringing one of their billboards to the Duluth community. Carlton County was excited to partner with AICHO in sharing this important public health message in multiple locations.

Ivy knew immediately where they should post the billboard in Duluth; she arranged to reserve one month of advertising on the billboard next to the AICHO building on busy 2nd Street in downtown Duluth. "Lots of cars go past AICHO, and it's in a prime spot. I love that this billboard has Indigenous representation in this predominantly white city," explained Ivy.

Noticing the impact

The billboard features a picture of Dr. Arne Vainio, an enrolled member of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, a family physician with Fond du Lac Human Services in Cloquet, and coincidentally

Ivy Vainio's husband. Dr. Vainio's quote emphasizes the importance of community in Indigenous culture: "I mask up to protect my family, elders, community, and patients."

The response was immediate, with community members, both American Indian and non-American Indian, reaching out to Ivy, AICHO, and Dr. Vainio to show their support of the billboard. It created a conversation that got people excited about sharing the message of masking up in the local community.

Continuing the message

The billboard is just one of the many ways that AICHO has worked to get COVID-19 safety messaging out to the American Indian community and broader Duluth community. AICHO also leveraged its large social media following to disseminate key messages. Ivy made an effort to work with well-known local and regional Indigenous artists to culturally enhance messages about COVID-19 safety that would visually resonate with the community. The result was beautiful artwork, posters, banners, and coloring sheets, which proved to be the most popular posts AICHO published during the pandemic. "Those Indigenous cultural art posters and coloring sheets got the highest views, 15,000 on some of them," Ivy said. This collaboration demonstrated the power of art and cultural messaging in sharing public health information.

For the Vainios, this work is personal. When Ivy is working on sharing COVID-19 information with the American Indian community, she is thinking about her 95-year-old grandmother, Teresa Trout, who is one of the oldest enrolled members of the Grand Portage Band of Ojibwe. Ivy shared, "I'm one of the biggest advocates of stay home and stay safe, because I want her and my grandpa safe from this virus."

Ivy hopes that AICHO can continue to take a similar approach as they ramp up vaccination efforts. They are already working on public engagement strategies to encourage getting vaccinated, such as a poster and billboard campaign in Duluth featuring prominent Indigenous and racially diverse community leaders. The strategy of leading with cultural wisdom and centering community leaders and elders will be key to continuing to protect American Indian Minnesotans during COVID-19.