

Faith Community Nurse Network brings holistic wellness throughout COVID-19 pandemic

A partnership built on health and faith

An unexpected and beautiful partnership blossomed between the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and Minnesota's faith communities amid the COVID-19 pandemic that brought so much heartache and loss. MDH's Cultural, Faith and Disabilities Branch (CFD), worked closely with faith communities throughout the state to share information on COVID-19 safety and vaccines and hold monthly calls for faith-based leaders to collaborate, share their concerns, and get important COVID-19 updates. One of the many organizations that MDH developed a partnership with was the Faith Community Nurse Network (FCNN) of the Greater Twin Cities.

FCNN is a network of over 400 registered nurses who work and volunteer in faith communities, senior living facilities, and other community settings to help provide whole-person care in their congregations and communities. FCNN serves faith community nurses in the Twin Cities metro and has a presence throughout the state. It is one of the largest organizations in Minnesota to bring together faith community nurses and provide them with resources, professional practice support, and continuing education, despite not being a membership organization. Abby Jessen, FCNN's executive director shared, "Since July 2020, we've been coordinating 12 faith community nurses (FCNs) to provide telephone reassurance calls to older adults who are experiencing isolation and loneliness due to the pandemic. We've also continued to hold small-group evidence-based falls prevention, chronic disease management, and family caregiver health promotion programs. FCNN has provided over 800 workshop sessions this last year."

Prioritizing holistic wellness

FCNN's focus is to not just share information about COVID-19 and keep communities safe, but also highlight the other areas that feed into holistic wellness, such as mental and emotional well-being. Physical distancing, while a key part of COVID-19 prevention, also meant fewer in-person gatherings. For some, especially Minnesota's older adults and people with disabilities, this has resulted in increased social isolation.

Knowing time was of the essence, FCNN acted immediately to address social isolation. With funding from the Metro Area Agency on Aging, FCNN started to make reassurance calls to older

adults in the metro area soon after the COVID-19 pandemic began. At first, calls were just focused on bringing a friendly voice to older adults, but later evolved to focus more on COVID-19. FCNs shared COVID-19 safety information, providing ways to help protect oneself from COVID-19, as well as resources on masking, testing, and vaccinations. FCNN also connected with Wendy Berghorst, co-lead of the faith-based communities team in MDH's CFD branch, to receive timely information and resources about COVID-19. Faith community nurses were invited to join MDH's monthly faith-based webinars to learn about information relevant to faith communities and the application of MDH guidance to faith activities. FCNN would then share with their communities the updated guidance and safe practices for resuming faith-based activities.

Expanding programming to combat social isolation and falls

Spearheading the safe reopening of FCNN's evidence-based health promotion programs was Jessica Drecktrah, FCNN's chief nursing officer. Drecktrah said that to her knowledge, "[FCNN] was one of the first organization in the state to safely bring in-person programming back. Bringing back in-person programs was a priority for us as we kept hearing of increased falls and social isolation among those we serve. In our first sessions back, we had residents cheering for us after class in appreciation. It has been incredibly heartfelt to return to our health promotion work in community."

Drecktrah also mentioned one silver lining to COVID-19 – the ability for FCNN to expand access to their programs through virtual platforms. Through online platforms, FCNN has been able to train over 100 new leaders throughout the state to keep up with the demand of in-person programs desired in senior living communities to help with safety and social isolation. With MDH guidance, FCNN has been able to bring back 75% of its in-person classes safely.

Continuing the community care

Two years after the start of the pandemic, Jessen applauds MDH for recognizing that, "[Faith communities] are an important player in [community] health." She shares that "To my knowledge, prior to COVID-19, MDH was not as involved with faith communities, and I am really grateful to have guidance developed for faith communities and have webinars to share directly with faith communities." Specifically, "being able to have a conversation and being

asked what [faith communities] need from MDH” has helped to build a relationship between MDH and certain faith communities.

FCNN has exemplified what it means to bridge faith and health by providing whole-person care in Minnesota’s congregations and communities. While the hope is that COVID-19 will impact our communities less over time, one thing that is not leaving is FCNN’s dedication to the community and promoting physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

