

## Rushing toward a crisis: How one community organization's ability to pivot was crucial in responding to COVID-19

Ready to jump in

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The Native American Community Clinic (NACC) on Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis provides a full range of health care services, with a dedication to address health disparities within the urban Native American community of the Twin Cities. At the beginning of the pandemic, it quickly became clear that the clinic's community would be impacted, and because of its role in the community, many expected the clinic to respond.

"People reached out right away," Dr. Antony Stately, chief executive officer of NACC said. "Community members were calling me, emailing me, and texting me."

Because of the clinic's reputation as a key care provider in unsheltered and transient communities, it also was quickly identified by many as an expert in addressing COVID-19 in this community. NACC partnered with the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), the city of Minneapolis, and South Side Harm Reduction to begin a COVID-19 testing initiative.

For MDH, this was a natural and crucial partnership. "People experiencing homelessness, particularly those [who] are unsheltered, were not able to access testing early in the pandemic," Blair Harrison, senior advisor on health, homelessness, and housing at MDH said. These communities are at particularly high risk for COVID-19 due to added challenges to social distancing and access to personal protective equipment, like masks. "We knew NACC is a trusted health care provider of the homeless community in Minneapolis and wanted to support their testing efforts," Harrison said.

With these partnerships in place and with funding from MDH, NACC began testing for COVID-19 in group housing environments and in the transient and homeless communities in Minneapolis. Despite many unanswered questions about the best way to respond to the emerging crisis of COVID-19, clinic staff understood the critical and time-sensitive nature of testing in these communities.

Gregg Harrison, director of operations at NACC, explained that clinic staff and clinicians had "a willingness to jump in when others were more cautious. It's part of our culture at NACC, a

willingness to figure things out as we go. We were willing to just step in and figure it out, because we understood that the risk to the communities we serve is so high.”

Dr. Stately agreed. “We rush toward a crisis. We do a lot of pivoting,” Dr. Stately said. “It makes us unique.”

#### Success through trusted relationships

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The team at the clinic, in partnership with local public health, coordinated several successful testing events. For example, they leveraged their relationships in the transient and homeless community in the Powderhorn neighborhood of Minneapolis to hold an effective testing event.

“The outreach teams at NACC know all those folks, so it is successful at reaching those people and getting them out to testing,” Harrison said.

Between July and December 2020, the clinic tested more than 1,108 members of the transient and homeless community for COVID-19. These community members may not have had access to testing without the tailored outreach they received.

Central to the clinic’s approach is their commitment to go beyond providing excellent health care services. “There’s been an intentional practice to reorient the clinic to own the value of the fact that we serve our relatives,” Dr. Stately said. “These people are our relatives and we have a responsibility to care for them.”

Trust between community members and the clinic was critical to the success of testing events.

#### A person-centered approach to vaccines

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Recently, NACC has been busy providing COVID-19 vaccinations to its communities. It is particularly well-positioned to vaccinate in group homes, shelters, and homeless communities. The clinic continues to take a relational approach as they provide vaccinations.

“We can’t just get people in the door and give them a shot and kick them out,” Dr. Stately said. “There is education and care that needs to happen...We cannot rush the process. We have to take time to build confidence and faith.”

By combining cultural wisdom, strong relationships, and a proactive approach, the clinic continues to be a trusted resource in its community for testing and vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic.