

SEWA-AIFW: Meeting the needs of the community

Raj Chaudhary, executive director at [SEWA-AIFW](#) (Asian Indian Family Wellness), a nonprofit organization committed to serving the South Asian community, emphasized how pre-existing partnerships with Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and other foundations provided opportunities for her organization to meet the multi-faceted community challenges of COVID-19, including increased food insecurity, inadequate shelter, sexual violence, mental health, and access to testing and vaccinations. Despite these numerous challenges, and keeping staff afloat, the organization was able to tirelessly respond to community during COVID-19, whilst promoting self-care amongst its staff.

Leveraging pre-existing partnerships

MDH has partnered with SEWA-AIFW since 2005. This collaboration was welcomed by the community as SEWA-AIFW is a trusted organization in the community. Responding to COVID-19, SEWA-AIFW organized virtual meetings and webinars such as "Building resilience and strengths during uncertain times" and held other events in conjunction with partner experts. These sessions helped to communicate about COVID-19 and legal information about the travel ban affecting many community members. Furthermore, [podcasts](#) and materials were produced in native languages to deliver COVID-19 messages, address myths and misconceptions. They also addressed domestic and sexual violence, disability, and leveraged their referral system to provide peer-to-peer support in the community. Information was also communicated through in-person and virtual health clinics, telehealth program, with referral screenings and consultations reaching 500 and 5,000 people respectively.

Through mobile units, MDH continues to support their testing, vaccination, and resource sharing efforts across partners. SEWA-AIFW partnered with MDH and Hennepin County Public Health to distribute personal protective equipment kits (hundreds of saliva test kits, 15,000 masks, and 5,000 hand sanitizers) to temples, churches, and mosques in communities. They also worked with MDH to provide mobile units to help support testing, vaccination, and outreach events.

"Despite that [community] demand was greater than the capacity, [partnerships] were helpful in facilitating assistance to communities," said Chaudhary. Looking forward, "maintaining and sustaining all the great relationships and networks into the future is needed," said Xp

Lee, [COVID-19 Community Coordinator](#) (CCC) lead. Many valuable lessons were learned from working with communities that could be applied and be of benefit in other areas. Similarly, Vu Dai, CCC supervisor, observed how there is still room to develop more networks and partnerships to reach out to "some API communities that are not well represented and where services have not reached," concluded Vu Dai, CCC supervisor.

SEWA-AIFW continues to receive regular calls regarding the COVID-19 testing centers and where to get booster shots from – resulting in 300 people having received boosters through their clinics. Dasharath Yata, assistant director at SEWA-AIFW noted that they received recognition from the community in doing COVID-19 vaccination by receiving an award from three regional non-profit and cultural organizations. The staff continue to receive thank you notes and text messages of appreciation from the community.

An emotionally fulfilling moment of this work was to witness how "one old Hindu man finally received a shot after being convinced of the importance of being vaccinated before he could see his grandchildren whom he missed," recalled Mubina Qureshi, gender and health equity programs manager. The shot was the man's first injection in his life.

Reflecting back

MDH's ability to reach out to affected communities during COVID-19 is mostly due to its pre-existing and trusted relationships with various community partners prior to the pandemic. It was important for the team to work with organizations they trusted to reach out and connect to communities. Vue Sincai, former MDH Asian and Pacific Islander (API) community liaison team member, confirmed how such partnerships have been unique, "in making the API community liaison team nimble in their response to community needs and requests." MDH's partnership with SEWA-AIFW is a testament to how "identifying [trusted] existing partners [is] crucial," as API Community Liaison Lead Duzong Yang believes.