

## The Road to Equity

### Advocating for and supporting Minnesota's disability community through COVID-19

#### Forging partnerships

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Early in the pandemic, MDH was hearing a need from the disability community to have a stronger partnership and be able to provide more input on decisions regarding the COVID-19 response. As a result, MDH brought together a small team of staff to address the needs and concerns of people with disabilities in Minnesota during the COVID-19 pandemic. This team, which came to be known as the disability unit, has worked to provide ongoing assessment, community engagement, guidance development, and other critical advocacy related to persons with disabilities in the COVID-19 response. Since then, the work of this team and their partners have expanded to forge new partnerships, meet specific community needs, and engage community members. One partnership that MDH developed was with Metropolitan Center for Independent Living (MCIL).

MCIL is a non-profit organization that works with the disability community in the Twin Cities and several counties in Greater Minnesota, to help people overcome barriers to accessing health resources. In partnership with MDH, local public health departments, and other community partners, MCIL has provided in-home testing, vaccination services, personal protective equipment, and high-quality masks to persons with disabilities facing major challenges in accessing essential COVID -19 resources.

"Working through our [COVID Community Coordinators](#) was a good start to help individuals living with disabilities," said Ann Schulte, former disability unit lead at MDH. Through this partnership, there is shared understanding to avoid a "one-size-fits-all approach" in responding to community needs. Individual accessibility challenges can vary widely from technological, sensory, cognitive, to physical. For example, in one case, MCIL staff assisted a mother in navigating in-home vaccination for her two teen boys with autism. "Going into an unfamiliar medical setting for this vaccination had the potential to cause the boys distress," said Frances Tobin, MCIL's lead staff person for their COVID Community Coordinator contract. In other cases, MCIL provided technological assistance to older adults who either had challenges using the Vaccine Connector to sign up for vaccination or in using the Docket app to access vaccination records. Frequently, MCIL provided in-home testing and vaccination to people with disabilities

and their caregivers who could not leave their home to access public sites. At present, people with disabilities across the state can still access in-home vaccination by contacting MCIL.

#### Meeting specific needs

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Tobin observed how, over time, calls to their organization increased as people with disabilities and their caregivers sought in-home supports because they were unable to leave their homes to get resources, testing, and vaccination. Responding to this need, MCIL eventually extended their support beyond persons with disabilities and children with special health needs to caregivers of people with disabilities as well. MDH worked with MCIL and others to create a way to track in-home vaccination requests throughout the state. Jenni Schwartz, MCIL's assistant director, applauded how this assisted them to keep track of call-in requests for in-home vaccinations.

#### Community engagement forums

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To strengthen its partnership with communities, MDH continues to engage community partners through virtual forums to perform ongoing assessments, influence guidance development, and provide information to community members for a more empowered community-driven response to COVID-19. The platforms prioritize the voices and experiences of people with disabilities in accessing COVID-19 resources. Schwartz stated how this has been beneficial to provide relevant resources to meet the needs of people with disabilities, which unfortunately had been overlooked during the initial COVID-19 vaccination rollout.

One example is the quarterly "Let's Talk" forums hosted by the Minnesota Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (MNCCD) and Minnesota Department of Health. These virtual community conversations include members of the disability community as well as partners from the education sector, the human rights sector, advocates, and organizations that serve people with disabilities. The forums provided a safe space and invaluable opportunity for community partners and members to "discuss common issues and [the] latest information, and [for MDH to] dissipate fears and anxieties and be responsive to community needs," explained Schulte.

Through these platforms, MDH shares the latest guidance such as mask wearing for children with sensory challenges. The forums also provide a space to discuss disability rights during the

pandemic with experts from the Disability Law Center, such as the rights of those who had been denied caregiver support in a hospital.

Additionally, as the COVID-19 response progressed, it became clear that MDH needed to engage more deeply with experts and partners through community engagement forums around multiple issues of accessibility. The Accessibility Workgroup was formed to inform the discussions on improving accessibility for people with disabilities of all MDH resources, and services. This included relevant and accurate information on appropriate transportation for people with disabilities and how to access it for testing and vaccinations.

Looking ahead

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As the pandemic continues to evolve and we learn more about the impacts and needs of the disability community, our partnerships must continue to grow and thrive. "Sustaining the gains made from strong networks and community partners, is [critical] for MDH to continue providing relevant and appropriate COVID-19 resources and services that are made for, and most importantly with, every community in Minnesota in mind," concluded Schulte.