

Uniting Against COVID-19: A Unique Public Housing Collaboration for Vaccinating Community

Bringing vaccines to the community

COVID-19 may have called for social distancing, but it certainly couldn't keep community collaboration and partnerships from thriving. In summer of 2020, when COVID-19 cases were just beginning to rise, Hennepin County partnered with Volunteers of America to conduct COVID-19 testing and provide health education on COVID-19 safety precautions to the residents in Minneapolis public housing complexes. The testing model utilized by Hennepin County and Volunteers of America was highly successful, and when the Minneapolis Health Department identified residents of Minneapolis Public Housing complexes as a priority population for COVID-19 vaccinations, they knew they had an effective model to build upon.

The Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) serves residents in Minneapolis to ensure that they have a place to call home. Residents of public housing make up a vibrant community of families, older adults, and people with disabilities from all ethnic, cultural, and community groups. However, as MPHA's Director of Housing Choice Vouchers Kyle Hanson described, many factors such as close quarters, limited health literacy, and lower-income created an environment that put the residents at a higher risk of getting COVID-19.

As soon as COVID-19 vaccines were available in Minnesota, the Minneapolis Health Department partnered with MPHA, Volunteers of America, the Minnesota Department of Health, and COVID Community Coordinators — community-based organizations contracted by MDH to connect Minnesota's diverse communities to COVID testing, vaccination, and other resources — to bring COVID-19 vaccines to 39 high-rise apartment complexes. Lara Pratt, Minneapolis Health Department's senior public health specialist on the Healthy Living Team, worked closely with MDH's African Community Liaison team to connect with partners and community organizations to make these vaccination events a success. Pratt stressed that while the Minneapolis Health Department convened and coordinated the effort, the vaccination events would not have taken place without "leveraging the best of what each entity could bring."

Playing to each organization's strengths

As Bill Melton and many of his team members from Volunteers of America emphasized, "Without everyone working together, the events would not have come together." MPHA jump-

started the efforts by sending all residents a package of information letting them know COVID-19 vaccines would be available. The package contained a registration form as well as a postcard for residents to send back to MPHA and let them know if they had already been vaccinated, were interested in getting vaccinated, or needed more information. From there, the Minneapolis Health Department, MPHA, and the MDH African Community Liaison team drew on their deep knowledge of the community to coordinate with COVID Community Coordinators and Volunteers of America for door-knocking and engagement activities.

Volunteers of America led the engagement and outreach because of their long-standing relationships with residents in public housing. For Volunteers of America leads Bill Melton and Rhonda Peterson, they “lived and breathed” this project for several months. Using a trauma-informed lens, staff called all interested apartment residents beforehand to notify them that COVID Community Coordinators and Volunteers of America staff would be door-knocking and answering vaccination questions in the community room, and then participated in the actual door-knocking and vaccination events in 39 different apartment complexes.

A week before the vaccination events at each of the respective apartment complexes, Volunteers of America and COVID Community Coordinator staff went door-to-door and helped register residents who were interested in getting their COVID-19 vaccine. They also set up a table at each apartment complexes’ community room to answer questions. The COVID Community Coordinators involved in the efforts included the Islamic Association of North America, African Immigrant Community Services, WellShare International, Tserha Aryam Kidist Selassie, CAPI USA, Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, and the Somali Medical Association of American Physicians. Holding diverse intersectional identities across race, gender, sexuality, and disability status, the Volunteers of America staff and COVID Community Coordinators were able to provide appropriate language support and be trusted liaisons to the residents using their expertise on community norms and approaching all residents with cultural and religious sensitivity.

Throughout the whole vaccination process, the Minneapolis Health Department coordinated all the partners to staff the events and provided day-of coordination, as well as the COVID-19 vaccines and nurses to help administer the vaccines. The health department contracted Hennepin Healthcare to give residents the vaccine, and Pratt noted that the nurses were “fabulous and performed incredible work on a tight timeline.” Minnesota Department of Health

COVID Community Coordinator Lead Aisha Galaydh, who helped spearhead the idea, was “amazed to see everyone coming together and being willing to do the hard work [of door-knocking].” For her, it was a “small idea that quickly grew into a big effort,” and she was “grateful to that everyone had the same goal [of vaccinating the community].”

Overcoming challenges

The collective vaccine team faced many challenges in vaccinating residents in 39 high-rise apartment complexes. Pratt noted that “There was a real urgency to get this done as quickly as possible. And some days, they would have four or five building vaccination events going on at the same time, making staffing a challenge.” She credits the Minneapolis Health Department, who served as the site lead at each building for coordinating the process, and Hennepin Healthcare with providing enough staff to give residents vaccines. Without them, the “vaccination process would have dragged out” and left vulnerable residents unprotected. One challenge brought up by everyone involved was addressing misinformation, and in some cases, figuring out what the misinformation was before they could even address it. For instance, many residents believed that this was not a vaccination event, but a ploy to give all residents COVID-19. It was not until the team overheard this from residents that they were able to soothe their fears. The COVID Community Coordinators and Volunteers of America staff helped address misinformation and increased vaccine confidence in all 39 apartment complexes. They also worked with the Somali Medical Association of American Physicians to address questions on the vaccine and its side effects and to provide accurate COVID-19 information.

Vaccination impact on the community, a successful endeavor

One mission brought all the partners together – bringing vaccines to the community. While some residents were more hesitant about opening their doors, other residents, particularly the older adults, were grateful for the connection to help alleviate social isolation and get the vaccine. African Immigrant Community Services staff shared that some residents offered tea, coffee, and cookies for coming in to talk and give information. With everyone’s combined efforts, 1,627 residents and staff were vaccinated and 93% of residents who were vaccinated came back for their second dose, “an amazing second dose rate” according to Pratt. While the vaccination events were incredibly successful, Hafsa Ali, one of MDH’s African Community Liaisons, believes that “the impact of reaching out to the community is more than the number vaccinated.” Without a doubt, the vaccination events would not have been successful without

the combination of strengths brought by Minneapolis Health Department, MPHA, Hennepin Healthcare, Volunteers of America, and MDH's COVID Community Coordinators and each organization's care for the community.

Special thanks

This story would not have been possible without the teams from Volunteers of America, Minneapolis Public Health, MPHA, and MDH's COVID Community Coordinators taking their time to share information on this incredible vaccination effort.