

## **COVID-19 Stories: An Olympic Achievement: Getting COVID-19 vaccines to the disability community**

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**Summary:** This past summer, many Minnesotans were able to celebrate the return of music and food festivals, neighborhood nights, and for some, the Special Olympics, which stopped for the last few years because of COVID-19. This summer, Special Olympics Minnesota hosted a weekend of competition with over 2,200 athletes, coaches, and partners in Stillwater, Minn. Minnesota Department of Health partnered with the Minnesota Disability Law Center and Stairstep Foundation, one of MDH's COVID Community Coordinator organizations, and were able to vaccinate 41 people with either a primary series of the vaccine or a booster at Special Olympics Minnesota.

This past summer, many Minnesotans were able to celebrate the return of music and food festivals, neighborhood nights, and for some, the Special Olympics, which stopped for the last few years because of COVID-19. The Special Olympics provides Olympic-style sports training competition for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. Since 1973, the Special Olympics has created space for people in the community to build their physical fitness, partake in competitive sports with other athletes, and convene the community for athletic events. This summer, Special Olympics Minnesota hosted a weekend of competition with over 2,200 athletes, coaches, and partners in Stillwater, Minn. One part of the Special Olympics is a program called Healthy Athletes, which provides free health screenings and education to Special Olympics athletes. As their website shares, "Despite a mistaken belief that people with intellectual disabilities receive the same or better health care than others, they typically receive sub-standard care or virtually no health care at all." For this summer's Special Olympics, the focus was not just on the sports competition, but also inclusive health.

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Unit initially fostered ties with Special Olympics Minnesota through the division's work to adapt the National Diabetes Prevention Program for people with mobility disabilities. The division also supported their work related to capacity building among public health staff. Kody Olson, MDH's new disability systems planner, rekindled MDH's involvement in the program following the COVID-19 pandemic. He, along with Rachel Garaghty, MDH's disability lead for the [COVID-19 Community Coordinator](#) initiative, championed the idea of bringing an MDH presence to the Special Olympics. Events that bring the disability community together have been rare since COVID-19. Garaghty said, "More than 1,000 people from the community attend the Special Olympics in Minnesota per day, so this was such a special opportunity and great success to have a community gathering of this size and allow MDH to support and build their presence in the community."

Garaghty noted that many people from the community have felt isolated since the start of the pandemic, and early public health recommendations did not always take the needs of people with disabilities into account, which created situations where their well-being was negatively impacted. As a result, many lost access to resources. Prior to COVID-19, MDH had a more limited system for engaging with the disability community. The MDH disability unit was created to help address these concerns in the community and help address needed services or resources. MDH now engages more directly with the community and continues building new relationships. For both MDH and community partners, opportunities to connect and collaborate help advance health equity in Minnesota.

JP Mahoehney, another member of MDH's disability team, also credits the work of previous MDH disability unit members Lisa Gemlo and Ann Schulte. "They really paved the way to more collaborative and direct community engagement with organizations that provide advocacy, public policy, and services and supports for people with disabilities," said Mahoehney. Mahoehney reflected that there has been a shift in the way that work has been conducted and he is excited about the current mindset of making sure that everyone has an opportunity to be as healthy as they can be.

#### [Going for a gold medal in community partnership](#)

The disability team reached out to Jeff Prendergast, health programs coordinator for the Special Olympics, to inquire about the possibility of collaborating, and the idea was met with great enthusiasm. Special Olympics provided MDH with an outdoor space in their main event area and MDH was able to set up a tent and COVID-19 vaccination stations and bring in a medical team. MDH also partnered with the Minnesota Disability Law Center and Stairstep Foundation, one of MDH's COVID Community Coordinator organizations, and were able to vaccinate 41 people with either a primary series dose of the vaccine or a booster. MDH also offered free COVID-19 tests and masks to anyone interested. Even for the people that chose not to get vaccinated during the event, Garaghty noted, "It was still a really positive experience for [many] folks in the community having their first interaction with MDH."

Garaghty says she can never stress enough the importance of working with community partners like Special Olympics Minnesota. She said, "They are already trusted by the communities they serve, [so] when MDH works with them, it allows us to support those communities and validates our work and trustworthiness." MDH partners know the disability community better than anyone else, and MDH continually learns from the knowledge, advocacy, and advice that the community partners bring in. The team firmly believes that strong relationships with community partners help MDH shape the work that the team does so they are meeting the needs of their community, and the team knows when those needs aren't being met and can actively work on those issues.

#### [Challenges and barriers](#)

While working with Special Olympics was a phenomenal and positive experience, Garaghty, Olson, and Mahoehney continue to elevate and address barriers and challenges that the disability community faces. One of them is the negative impact that COVID-19 has had on the disability community. People with disabilities have higher rates of hospitalization, severe illness, and mortality from COVID-19 due to inequities in accessing vaccination, treatment, and testing. Garaghty noted they have experienced higher levels of social isolation, a severe shortage of caregivers for people with disabilities, and ongoing discrimination by many medical systems. MDH is actively working to address these inequities. "The [MDH disability] team is committed to being aware of those barriers and doing everything they can with partners and on our own to overcome them," said Garaghty.

One action item, Mahoehney reflected on, is continuing to prepare and notify the community about opportunities like MDH's vaccination clinic at the Special Olympics. During the vaccination event, Mahoney noticed that most people getting vaccinated were supporters of people with disabilities such as parents or caregivers, and not the people with disabilities themselves. He hopes that with increased flexibility, preparation, and investment in the community, MDH can create environments that combat ableism and foster a culture where people with disabilities are directly engaged, and where they can feel confident making their own public health decisions.

### [The games \(and public health initiatives\) continue](#)

Despite the fact that the Summer Games events are over, the work continues. Garaghty says she's excited that for the next two years, until June 2024, MDH will have six dedicated COVID Community Coordinators that serve the disability community, two of which will be concentrating on providing tailored vaccination events for the community. She said, "Having two specific disability COVID Community Coordinators out there hosting vaccination events will help lead to additional partnerships and relationship building." Part of this work will mean continuing MDH's partnership with Special Olympics. In fact, work has already begun to plan flu and COVID-19 clinics for the community this fall. As parting words, the disability team shared, "Everything we do is part of our commitment to work with people with disabilities in the community and organizations that support people with disabilities." The team hopes to continue broadening and strengthening partner relationships over the coming years and expand their collaborative approach to address the health inequities for people with disabilities throughout the scope of public health.