

COVID-19 STORIES

Embedding Cultural Communications

Language and culture carry a community's traditions, values, norms, and world outlook, which means engaging communities requires being respectful of different cultural practices. MDH recognized this and worked with partners to adapt information in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways so that messaging and resources would not only reach the community, but also resonate with the community.

Puspa Bhandari, program manager of the Bhutanese Community Organization, confirmed how translating material into Nepali was beneficial in reducing hesitancy to get vaccinated in the Bhutanese community.

"This innovation was from the community engagement efforts of the Cultural, Faith, and Disability Communities (CFD) branch in intentionally partnering with diverse communities during the COVID-19 pandemic," said Dan-Tam Phan-Hoang, the supervisor of the new Cultural Communications Team. Phan-Hoang also noted that much of the cultural communications work has evolved and expanded during the pandemic, from going beyond translations to being intentional in considering cultural knowledge in designing printed and video messages in multiple languages.

The Cultural Communications Team was developed using lessons learned from working with communities during COVID-19 and was formally integrated into the Communications Office at MDH in 2022.

Addressing the barriers

The Cultural Communications Team is made up of staff who are from the communities they are working to serve. They know the language, culture, and traditions intimately, which gives them the ability to provide a cultural lens on communication materials beyond translation. Their fluency in Hmong, Somali, and Spanish allows them to create multilingual materials. This current structure and multi-faceted cultural communications work addresses the previous challenges faced in solely relying on contracted translators to assist in producing timely resources for the community.

The translation and review process with external agencies was slower and struggled to keep up with the evolving COVID-19 information and community demand for updated information. "It could take [several] weeks to get feedback from external translation vendors and circle it back to communities," said Duzong Yang, the COVID-19 Asian Pacific Islander community liaison lead in the CFD branch.

Having an in-house team fully dedicated in this work has been beneficial to both MDH and the communities it serves. The quality of work has greatly improved and is meeting the everchanging needs from the pandemic.

Filling the gaps

"In our work, we wear multiple hats. We are translators, reviewers, proofreaders, editors, interpreters, and consultants. We are the voice and image of the communities we [ourselves] reside in. We use our bilingual skills to transmit messages from MDH to our communities," beamed Janina Roodell, the Spanish cultural communications specialist on the Cultural Communications Team.

The new team currently focuses on COVID-19 resource development and offers trainings for MDH staff to learn about cultural communications. For other topic areas and languages, MDH is piloting a multilingual pay differential program, which allows MDH staff with bilingual or multilingual skills to be compensated for translating and reviewing health messaging to ensure its appropriateness and applicability to communities. "This program allows such employees to be compensated for the language services [Mandarin] I offer during a certain pay period," said Erica Chung, an international health planner at MDH.

The multilingual pay differential program complements the cultural communications work. "It is cost-effective and timely in addressing the challenges of solely relying on outsourced translation services," said Phan-Hoang.

Beyond COVID-19

Although it was created out of the COVID-19 pandemic, the work of the Cultural Communications Team is recognized as having great promise for other parts of the department as well. That is why the 2023 budget plan put forward by Governor Tim Walz and Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan includes funding for the team to expand its work beyond COVID-19 and become part of the department's ongoing public health infrastructure.

<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/stories/cc.html>