

MDH partnership in serving people with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated existing gaps in equitable situations for people with disabilities. The community experienced disparities in accessing health care services, critical public health information materials, and effective communication services. People who are deaf and people with vision and hearing loss experienced unique challenges in navigating testing, vaccination, and health information resources.

Recognizing the need to address these health inequities, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) partnered with Keystone Interpreting Services (KIS) to reduce barriers in accessing COVID-19 information, testing, and vaccination resources.

The work of KIS

KIS Minnesota is a partnership organization of two nationally known deaf and hearing interpreters (Jimmy Beldon and Patty McCutcheon) with over 30 years of community-based interpreting and translation experience. They provide services to people who are deaf, blind, and hard of hearing.

Thanks to an MDH grant contract, KIS established the Deaf Community Support Center (DCSC) to provide vaccination, testing and health recovery programming to Minnesota's disability communities. KIS uses its team of certified American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters and technical expertise as the backbone for the DCSC's work. Their ASL interpreters have extensive training for situations that call for more advanced cultural and linguistic communication.

Establishing DCSC

The establishment of DCSC was driven by emerging community needs. Facing numerous accessibility barriers to COVID-19 testing and vaccination resources, communities reached out to Beldon to help them address these barriers. This led to the formation of an organization deeply embedded in the community to advance Beldon's vision.

At the start of the pandemic, KIS worked with MDH to address some of these accessibility challenges. For example, there was unclear public health messaging and lack of accessible messaging targeting those living with disabilities.

To address this information gap, "DCSC offered both in-person and virtual trainings to community partners in basic sign languages. Trainings were tailored to meet the language and organizational needs of the people served," said Jasmine Rademacher, former DCSC community specialist. Their work also revolved around holding workshops on COVID-19 prevention information and raising awareness on the importance of masking, testing, and vaccinations.

Additionally, DCSC supports community partners with tips in website development and improvement to improve accessibility for people who have low vision or are blind and people who are hard of hearing. They also increase community awareness of available resources that provide accommodations.

Reaching out to communities

Through MDH, DCSC connected with the Deaf Hard of Hearing Services Division (DHHS) at the Department of Human Services to provide interpreting services to its network of partners to make testing and vaccination services for COVID-19 and flu accessible to people who are deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing.

In 2022, DCSC hosted its first vaccination event for the deaf community at DeafNation Expo, a national gathering that took place in Minnesota. Incentives were provided to those who received their COVID-19 vaccination. MDH supported the event by providing a licensed medical team, supplies, and logistics.

“We exceeded our target, as many people from Ramsey and Washington County turned up for the event,” said Amanda Smith, DCSC community specialist. The community gave positive feedback expressing their appreciation for the resources and support for people with hearing and vision disabilities during the event.

Much of DCSC’s work is driven from experience working with deaf schools and communities. “Jasmine and I grew up in the deaf community and identify with the needs of our members. We are here to bridge the gap between MDH and the deaf community to make services more accessible,” said Smith.

DCSC also collaborated with Homeland Health, Odam Medical Group, and Minnesota Health Fairview to help host vaccine events providing ASL interpreters and language translators.

Partnering with other community partners

DCSC held workshops in schools and communities to explain COVID-19 information and provide details on where to access different resources. They partnered with Special Olympics Minnesota, Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf (MSAD), Metro Deaf School in Saint Paul, and other partners to distribute 2,000 testing kits. DCSC also supported the community by providing knowledge and skills training to better serve people with disabilities.

DCSC has successfully reached out to 170 networks in Minnesota – including rural regions where there is limited access for the deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing community. DCSC plans to make their services more visible and known even outside the Minnesota Twin Cities metro area. Its services are funded by state grants and are free for other community partners to access. Rademacher shared DCSCs vision for expanding their networks with public schools to provide mental health workshops for students recuperating from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These workshops engage them in virtual yoga sessions and various hands-on game activities to help them gain confidence in their social comfort zone.

Future work

MDH continues to respond to the needs of the deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing communities in its post-pandemic recovery period. Through several cross-agency workgroups, including the Disability Health Equity Collaborative and the Disability Data Affinity Group, the agency is devoted to strengthening its platforms for community engagement to elevate the needs and concerns of people with disabilities.