News and Announcements

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Community Coordinators initiative strives to overcome disparities in COVID-19 impacts

Initiative brings resources to help communities hit hardest by pandemic

A new Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) program is under way to help fight disparities tied to COVID-19. Begun in early November, the COVID-19 Community Coordinators program taps into the knowledge, expertise and networks of community-based organizations to help share information on COVID-19 safety precautions, available resources like food, medicine, and transportation, and where to be tested for the virus.

“The data clearly shows that communities of color and American Indians are disproportionately affected by COVID-19,” said Minnesota Commissioner of Health Jan Malcolm. “This disparity stems from a number of systemic factors, such as structural racism. We have less information on the impacts of COVID-19 on LGBTQ communities and people with

disabilities, but plenty of other data tells us that our LGBTQ and disability communities experience health disparities and barriers to care. The COVID-19 Community Coordinators program is one step forward in addressing these disparities."

The program helps guide resources and response activities to better meet the needs of people and communities. It will provide capacity to community-based organizations to serve populations disproportionately affected by or at-risk for COVID-19, such as communities of color (African American, African immigrant, Asian American, Pacific Islander and Latinx communities), American Indians, disability communities, LGBTQ communities, and people with limited English proficiency. Community coordinators will help people access testing and available support services for those who test positive, in partnership with local public health departments.

"Not everyone has the resources or the living situation to be able to isolate or quarantine themselves, and many face barriers to getting tested. The community coordinators will bridge gaps within systems that are not working for many of our communities," said Kou Thao, director of the Center for Health Equity at MDH.

"Working closely with community partners ensures that information is disseminated in the ways that people are used to receiving it and from the messengers they trust. Taking a culturally-focused and trauma-informed approach means more people will be able to effectively protect themselves and their loved ones and slow the spread of the virus," Thao said.

COVID-19 Community Coordinators are located across the state and are staffing helplines that the public can call to ask questions related to testing or resource needs to stay safe and healthy during the pandemic. Helpline staff speak 20 different languages. In addition, engaging community partners will help provide public health information earlier on in the process, so that when and where people are tested, they will receive culturally appropriate information and resources for themselves and their families, regardless of what language they speak.

"We created this program after conversations with multiple community partners and stakeholders from across Minnesota. It was clear that while the pandemic has caused many community-based organizations to struggle to keep their doors open, the demand for supportive services was only increasing. The COVID-19 Community Coordinators initiative is equipping agencies with the resources to help communities navigate this pandemic," said Thao.

One example of such a partnership is the Minnesota Department of Human Services' Resettlement Network COVID-19 care hotline for refugees and immigrants, which launched Friday. Available from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, the new hotline, 651-318-0989, will ensure refugees and immigrants can get accurate, timely information about the COVID-19 pandemic and other services offered through the Resettlement Network (https://mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/adults/services/refugee-assistance/).

Hotline staff speak Amharic, Anuak, Arabic, French, Hindi, Karen, Lingala, Luganda, Mashi, Oromo, Somali, Spanish and Swahili. Language line help is available for callers needing any other language.

"This hotline will provide a wealth of information in multiple languages so refugees and other immigrants can quickly get the help they need on COVID-19 as well as other important services," said Human Services Commissioner Jodi Harpstead.

A number of community organizations offer similar services. "Briva Health is working to ensure communities facing COVID-19 disparities navigate to critical resources needed during this pandemic; our collective efforts are having a significant impact on people's lives and we are grateful to be part of this important response effort," said Hodan Guled of Briva Health.

"The African American Leadership Forum (AALF) and Phyllis Wheatley Community Center are working together to support Minnesota's African American community by developing a Minnesota Black Community COVID-19 Hotline where callers are connected to health, financial, childcare, and housing resources, as well as other supportive services,

to assist them throughout the pandemic. The hotline is a valuable resource for the Black community, as it addresses the impacts of both the pandemic and systemic racism," said Marcus Owens, Executive Director of the African American Leadership Forum.

The health department plans to continue supporting the COVID-19 Community Coordinators program as needs arise, designating personnel and resources to make sure the coordinators have the support they need to effectively serve their communities.

For more information on resources available to Minnesotans and to find helpline numbers, visit COVID-19 Community Coordinators on the MDH website.

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