

Overview

In Louisiana, the COVID-19 pandemic has been especially fierce, affecting urban and rural areas alike. St. Landry Parish, a mostly rural area of 90,000 residents located approximately 60 miles west of Baton Rouge, was no exception. When cases began rapidly rising in March, Opelousas General Health System (OGHS), the area's main health care provider, knew that it would need to collaborate effectively with the community and local government — with an urgency unlike any other time in its 60-year history.

OGHS is part of the [Healthy St. Landry Alliance](#), a consortium of more than 25 local partners that includes other health care providers, local government, faith-based organizations and community groups. The consortium was established in 2018 to engage, empower and educate residents for an improved and sustained quality of life. Managed by the OGHS Foundation, the Alliance serves as an extension into the community to help address social determinants of health and other issues that extend beyond hospital walls.

Through the relationships built and structure provided by the Alliance, OGHS was able to rapidly enact a communications and response system, effectively responding to gaps in community needs and support, and helping tackle existing health disparities in the region further exacerbated by COVID-19.

Approach

The Alliance's goals and objectives outlined in its 2018 founding charter helped position health care providers and community leaders to take on the public health challenges St. Landry Parish faces during the COVID-19 pandemic. First and foremost, Alliance members agreed to create a [community resource directory](#), free to all residents and available online and via paper copy. The Alliance also called for setting up a medical hub, which would centrally coordinate and provide health and wellness services to the community, and later

agreed to host community roundtables and convenings on mental health and rural community health.

As the pandemic hit, the Alliance found itself quickly taking the lead in managing the region's response. "COVID-19 requires a response like no other I've ever seen," noted OGHS CEO Ken Cochran. "The ongoing relationships and efforts of the

Healthy St Landry Alliance were a natural fit to ensure our health system connected with the community. It is humbling to learn all the great work people are doing to serve others."

Impact

The Alliance initiated daily conference calls to enhance communication, establishing a vital connection between health care providers and the community for COVID-19 resources and updates. Working in tandem with Alliance leadership, OGHS also quickly stood up



a mass text-messaging platform for its leadership, staff, physicians and board members, allowing for rapid communication and up-to-the-minute updates to address crises as they occur. These communications structures directly fed into its external relations efforts, allowing the parish to inform and educate its residents on social distancing and other safety guidelines, as well as how to seek medical assistance.

Moreover, the Alliance embraced its role as the go-to community liaison for pandemic response efforts, establishing a feedback loop with community members by building on its network of partners. Through its communications pipeline, trusted community partners such as local churches and faith-based organizations were able to help pinpoint residents' needs, which OGHS and other Alliance partners in turn were able to address. This included mobilizing food banks to meet food insecurity needs, already an issue in St. Landry Parish, and providing supports for its diaper bank to help families adversely affected by the virus to care for their children.

St. Landry's two-way feedback mechanism also was bolstered by its previously established directory, as it has provided residents with a tool to quickly identify the area's service landscape.

Lessons Learned

While COVID-19-related challenges remain, the Healthy St. Landry Alliance is using key lessons to address challenges more effectively and also help mitigate negative outcomes. Keys to success that this model demonstrates include:

1. **Central, effective communication is critical.** With key partners, assigned roles and a platform for communication in place, it's easier to take organized action and quickly inform responders and community members of important news and updates.
2. **Ensure flexibility in any strategic planning effort.** In the face of changing circumstances, the best strategic plans are not overly rigid but instead have core tenets that can adapt to any situation.

3. **Be visible in the community.** Opportunities for collaboration and information sharing will not reach their full potential if community members are unaware of health care providers' and partners' programs and efforts to engage with the community.

4. **Put in the effort to build critical relationships.** Partnerships are only able to progress when there is trust among members, and building that trust requires an active presence and effort in people's lives — whether through regular communication, education, resource allocation, events and roundtables, or other means.

Future Goals

OGHS and the Healthy St. Landry Alliance plan to build upon their efforts and successes by improving communication with residents and ensuring the timely delivery of information and resources to people who need it most. In particular, there are plans to host a summit that will bring together a diverse set of stakeholders, including health care providers, community social service agencies and local municipalities, with the goal of collaboratively addressing the social factors that contribute to health and economic vitality in rural communities.

"The Healthy St. Landry Alliance hopes to assist other communities in standing up a response system that they can activate in similar situations in the future," said Tracey Antee, executive director of the Alliance. "In these times, it's important to develop a group focused on community health that is sustainable and continues to provide resources and information dissemination before, during and after any type of public health crisis." She added, "The ability to activate a network that is community based provides a significant opportunity to reach all sectors of the population by engaging on a more trusting and personal level."

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