

Overview

Communicating crucial health information is key in preventing the transmission of COVID-19 and mitigating its spread. For populations who speak a language other than English, communication is particularly important since health and health care disparities that already exist put them at higher risk for more severe illness during the pandemic. Advancing health equity and protecting all populations during the pandemic both are paramount.

Immigrant communities are particularly vulnerable to health, educational and economic challenges. In rural north central Wisconsin, messaging about the COVID-19 pandemic was not consistently reaching the Hmong and Latino communities. Local and state organizations now are partnering to meet this challenge.

Approach

To address existing communication barriers, a small group of people from across central Wisconsin met virtually to discuss the challenges and develop an innovative approach. This group began reaching out to gather more partners and write and submit a grant. The initial group included representatives from Ascension Wisconsin, Marshfield Clinic Health System, Aspirus, Medical College of Wisconsin—Central Wisconsin, Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service, E.A.G. Interpreters Hispanic Outreach, and the Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce.

The collaborators developed a proposal that focused on strengthening communication channels and facilitating regular information exchange between local health systems, public health officials, resource agencies, and people in the Hmong and Latino communities, by establishing community coordinators and a network of community liaisons. Project partners contribute in many



different ways including sharing cultural insights, making trusted community connections, grant writing, in-house printing, providing financial support, offering evaluation expertise, providing educational resources, collating available resources, providing IT support, enhancing health care access, linking to basic needs, and donating masks and materials.

The initial grant proposal was not funded. However, by building on small successes and additional efforts, the partnering organizations obtained local funds and began implementing a pilot project. For this pilot, E.A.G. Interpreters Hispanic Outreach and the United Way of Marathon County coordinated a grocery distribution event for Latino families in north central Wisconsin. This event helped project partners further identify community needs as well as individuals in the community who could serve as liaisons and share information to and from their own community.

Building on the momentum, several new partners joined the effort, including Marathon County Health Department, Hmong American Center, North Central Health Care, United Way of Marathon County, Bridge Community Clinic, Family Health La Clinica (a federally qualified health center), United Way of Wisconsin, 2-1-1 Wisconsin and the Free Clinic.

In May 2020, eight people began training as part-time community liaisons. Four of these individuals are liaisons with the Hmong community, and the other four are liaisons with the Latino community. The training included learning about COVID-19 prevention measures and testing, and how to answer anticipated questions and address challenges. Role playing and modeling preventive behaviors, such as masking and handwashing, were emphasized during the training.

Impact

From May through July 2020, the project has helped more than 1,000 Latino and Hmong families in central Wisconsin share their concerns and needs, and at the same time receive information and resources about COVID-19 in their preferred language.

Strengths of the project include:

- Having a backbone organization is key. The Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service took on a substantial leadership role in coordinating, fundraising, communicating and training. WIPPS' flexibility and dedication assured the effective launch and maintenance of this project.
- The design of the project — including in-person, appropriately distanced, verbal sharing of information — has been very effective. Reading literacy among some Hmong elders is low, and thus translated, written communications are less effective. The in-person, socially distanced contacts are more effective for communicating essential health information.
- Liaisons with the Marathon County Health Department identified the need for developing guidelines for



Hmong funerals. A guide that is relevant to all funeral practices — not just for people observing Hmong traditions — was created and published in English and Hmong.

- Liaisons with the Latino community shared that some individuals are reluctant to take advantage of community resources and services because they fear that their citizenship status would be revealed. Liaisons addressed this concern by explaining what is to be expected in each situation. For example, Latino liaisons worked with health department personnel at a free COVID-19 testing site and explained to interested participants that they would not be asked about their immigration status, but if tested for COVID-19, they would need to answer phone calls, even from unfamiliar numbers, to receive test results. Liaisons also have been instrumental in building community trust to facilitate the ability of health departments to conduct contact tracing.
- The Spanish word for “quarantine” implies 40 days, which can cause confusion since COVID-19 quarantines are 14 days. Project liaisons have reduced that confusion by providing accurate information about quarantining in a culturally and linguistically knowledgeable way.

Lessons Learned

- Build on existing partnerships and relationships. The project group came together relatively quickly because many of the individuals already had connections and working relationships with each other. Without that trust and prior collaborative experience, the planning would have proceeded more slowly — and may have faltered.
- Understand that credibility matters. The liaisons are reaching out to people in their own communities. They are invited into homes — where they are candidly spoken to and listened to intently — because of their history with and connection to that particular community.
- Act nimbly. When Latino liaisons visited a dairy farm to share information with Spanish speakers, they encountered some workers from Kenya who inquired about getting information in their own language. After taking this request to the community coordinator and



project manager, resources in Swahili were located and then shared with the Kenyan workers.

- Build on the basics. More than 500 Latino families participated in grocery distribution events. At those events, community liaisons shared additional information about COVID-19 prevention and testing.
- Remember it doesn't hurt to ask. The Hmong American Center in the city of Wausau has been a constant for the Hmong community for 35 years. Since spring 2020, the Hmong American Center has become a central physical location for this project, as needed. The center has been welcoming and flexible in accommodating requests for storage space (e.g., for masks and hand sanitizer), leadership education and training, emergency food and rental assistance, employment and immigration information, and other activities for Hmong and Latino participants in the project.
- Use technology. One of the small grants received funded the purchase of iPads, which are used to share and play videos with coronavirus information. Reading is difficult for many individuals receiving services, so the videos are a primary means of communicating messages effectively.
- Include and increase visibility of community members' voices. The informational videos are created by individuals who are Latino or Hmong. These videos are recorded in the first language of the listener, but the presenter is a member of the respective racial or ethnic group. For example, the Hmong Medical Association has created several videos on the coronavirus that feature experts who are Hmong.

One overall success of the project is how it has empowered some of the community liaisons. The liaisons are taking the opportunity to become leaders and advocates in their community. They have stepped up with integrity, strength and confidence to help fight the spread of the coronavirus. For instance, Latino liaisons found their way around a dairy farm, earning the trust of not only the farm workers but also the farm employers, and learned how to handle arguments that arise but are contrary to the facts they are providing.

Future Goals

The individuals and organizations collaborating on this project are passionate about reducing the impacts of COVID-19. Now there is momentum to implement further work to strengthen communication channels via the Hmong and Latino community liaisons. The project costs approximately \$10,000 each month to fund the coordinators and liaisons' time and expenses, with additional in-kind support provided by the Medical College of Wisconsin—Central Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service. Funding is available through late fall 2020.

Project partners will continue to collect data to tally the number of people being reached, directly and indirectly; collect basic demographics; assess knowledge about COVID-19 and community behaviors; and identify resources needed by the communities. Partners also will continue to apply for funding for the project.


Existing relationships and communication pathways have been strengthened, and new ones have been built. These relationships and pathways will be essential as the coronavirus continues to challenge communities.

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