



Oneida County Health Department: Leveraging Community Partnerships to Strengthen the COVID-19 Pandemic Response

At Oneida County Health Department, cooperation is baked into daily operations: The health department offers many of its services — from vaccinations and tobacco prevention to car seat safety checks and cancer prevention programs — in collaboration with community partners. So when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the county, which is home to fewer than 38,000 people, it was only natural for the health department to leverage these partnerships.

“We ran testing sites at schools and community buildings, such as town halls,” said Linda Conlon, Oneida County Health Department’s Director and Health Officer. “And when the vaccine became available, we worked with employers to get staff vaccinated on-site.”

The health department also set up a mass vaccination clinic at a church gymnasium — complete with a drive-up vaccine option and a buzzer system to keep people socially distanced.

When asked how the health department managed to build strong community relationships with schools, local employers, and community organizations, Conlon stressed 2 factors: responsiveness and compromise. To help field questions and inquiries, the health department hired short-term staff, relied on volunteers, and set up a 24-hour on-call schedule. “Although we were very, very tired and very, very busy, we wanted to be responsive to our community partners, to the people that were asking us questions, in order to cultivate those relationships and build trust,” Conlon said.





The health department also tried to find unique solutions that met its partners' needs while still following recommendations designed to keep the community safe. "We really strive to work with all of our partners individually to address their concerns," Conlon said.

For example, when a small school needed a way to keep students in person after a potential COVID-19 exposure — rather than having them quarantine at home, as was the policy at the time — the health department and school administrators created an individualized plan. "They changed the way their school was set up so the kids could quarantine in school," Conlon said. "They didn't ride the bus. They were taught by themselves, ate by themselves, but they would have the windows in the quarantine room so they could see and interact with the other kids. This allowed parents to go to work, and it allowed students the consistency of going to school but still ensured the safety of the other students."

While this individualized approach takes a lot more time and effort than instituting blanket policies, to Conlon, it's worth it. "In small communities, you really have to find a way to work things out because you need your partners," she said. "Public health is collaboration and partnership — and striving to help every agency, every partner, every person in our community in order for us to be healthy and to be safe."

Learn more about Oneida County Health Department's work:
publichealth.co.oneida.wi.us

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