

AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: NAVIGATING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FOR DEEP IMPACT IN MILWAUKEE - A COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IMPERATIVE (CRI) CASE STUDY

Executive Summary

August 28, 2023

Abstract

This case study explores the impact of deep community engagement and power-sharing through forming the Community Resilience Imperative (CRI) during Milwaukee County's COVID-19 response. It was crucial to involve individuals with expertise and connections to communities impacted by health and racial inequalities in the County's efforts to address the pandemic. This helped to bridge gaps and bring invaluable knowledge, enhance credibility, and facilitate trust-building between government and community. The case study highlights the community-centered decision-making process, the real-time information exchange between the community and systems, and the significance of addressing racism and its effects when advancing health equity. Readers will gain insights and lessons for enhancing community partnerships and empowering Black and brown populations in public health initiatives.

Key Findings and Insights:

1. **Community-Centered Decision-Making:** The case study emphasizes the pivotal role of individuals with both context (geographic, cultural, and community) and content (public health) expertise in shaping decisions during the pandemic. Including these voices facilitated a more collaborative and effective approach to addressing the crisis.
2. **Racial Equity Commitment:** Milwaukee County's commitment to addressing racism as a public health crisis in 2019 laid the foundation for inclusive and equitable pandemic response efforts, demonstrating the importance of addressing systemic inequalities.
3. **Collaboration and Power-Sharing:** Including Black Milwaukeeans catalyzed operations and decision-making shifts within the Unified Emergency Operations Center (UEOC), resulting in more effective community engagement.
4. **Innovative Resource Allocation:** The resulting community-led initiatives and re-granting processes allowed for the efficient allocation of resources, ensuring that funding reached grassroots organizations and communities in need.
5. **Improved Messaging and Trust-Building:** The resulting culturally sensitive messaging and trusted messengers were vital in increasing trust among residents and encouraging vaccine uptake.
6. **Impact on Vulnerable Populations:** Data-driven decision-making, combined with the involvement of resident experts, significantly improved vaccine distribution, reducing COVID-19 transmission and mortality rates.

Recommendations:

1. Replicate the CRI Model: Encourage the replication of the CRI model in other regions to enhance community engagement and equitable decision-making in public health work as well as other aspects of problem-solving.
2. Prioritize Community Voices: Prioritize the voices of underrepresented communities and residents in decision-making processes, ensuring their needs are central to all efforts to advance the community.
3. Invest in Culturally Competent Messaging: Engage trusted community messengers and develop and disseminate culturally sensitive messages by employing asset-based approaches.
4. Expand Funding Accessibility: Implement community-informed re-granting processes to make funding accessible to grassroots organizations and under-resourced communities, which can increase alignment between needs and resources.
5. Embrace Structural Change: Embrace equity as a dynamic process and foster structural organizational changes to ensure ongoing community engagement and power-sharing.

Conclusion:

Milwaukee County's experience demonstrates the profound impact of authentic community engagement and power-sharing in pandemic response efforts. By empowering residents, collaborating across sectors, and addressing racial disparities, Milwaukee County saved lives and set a new standard for community-driven public health initiatives. This case study provides valuable insights and serves as a model for enhancing community partnerships and promoting equity in future public health endeavors.

Access to the full document:

county.milwaukee.gov/EN/Office-of-Equity