

Case Study: Highlights

Effective Intermediary Organization Bridging the Gap between the Community and Government

The Issue:

Community members, community-based organizations (CBOs), and the government within North Carolina have struggled to collaborate on public health initiatives. At the height of the pandemic, when vaccines began to roll out, it was apparent that there were no clear pathways to communicate between them about what the community needed and what the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NC DHHS) had to offer. NC DHHS wanted to establish a structure to build relationships across the state while improving vaccination outcomes for historically marginalized populations (HMPs), which launched *Healthier Together*.

"Oh, I would say folks were very frustrated. When thinking about vaccine roll-out to begin with, I think folks were very frustrated with the state in terms of ... what the pathways were to communicate with us, I think the partnerships on the ground where you know, vaccine clinics where the decisions were made to host vaccine clinics and what those partners felt very opaque to folks. I think that you know we can put a checkbox in the column of "not coordinated" and "not well appreciated", although I think those relationships existed in silos. And one other point that I want to add is, so I think a lot of individuals around the department had very strong relationships. But there, we didn't really have a structure for building or consulting."

- comment by a NC DHHS staff member

Program Description:

Healthier Together is a public-private partnership between NC DHHS and NC Counts Coalition. Each organization brings to the table different assets: NC DHHS contributes resources and funding, while NC Counts brings experience working with individuals from HMPs and extensive existing relationships with the community and its leaders. *Healthier Together* set out to fund CBOs who serve people from HMPs, to mitigate COVID-19 through vaccination outreach and education efforts. *Healthier Together* also aimed to work with these local CBOs and existing networks that serve HMPs to forge deep relationships to address the pre-existing disconnect between the government and the community.

"I would say. Overall. The idea of Healthier Together is a good idea. It makes sense to partner a group like DHHS, which just the resources that they have, the longstanding history that they have, the power – with a group that works directly in the community."

- comment by an External Collaborator

Impact Statement:

NC DHHS was able to reach the community and bridge the gap by partnering with NC Counts as an intermediary organization. Having a liaison organization to provide technical assistance and support, led to a reduced burden for CBOs as they contracted with *Healthier Together*. It also resulted in a successful regional team model, staffed by NC Counts, leading vaccination strategies in each region through the lens of their lived experience as members of their community.

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NC Counts was also able to draw CBOs together, increasing their relationships and their willingness to work together on delivering vaccination services (and other health issues going forward). NC Counts also leveraged their existing connections to increase the reach of vaccine services into HMPs. Their knowledge of the community elicited vaccination strategies catered specifically to communities of focus and their needs.

"Oh, I think we had really built strong. We've had strong relationships prior to Healthier Together. I think that's also why individuals or groups wanted to participate, and were willing to participate with a government, a government-lifted program because we have built those relationships before Healthier Together."

- comment by an NC Counts staff member

Summary:

The need for a framework that guides how the community engages with the government and encourages the government to listen to the community was apparent. Partnering with a grassroots organization that serves as an intermediary was a successful venture to build sustainable relationships and vaccinate people from HMPs across the state of North Carolina. NC Counts was also able to successfully navigate the unique middle position they were in while advocating for the community and pushing against the department when necessary.

"...compliments about them being really, yeah, connected and aware, and also having that ability, you know, and I'm sure it's a unique relationship to have that partnership with the Department, you know, to have a huge grant. But I thought that they were able to kind of stand their own ground, at least like advocate for their stakeholders against what the Department might think is best, and I think that that's very important, because you can –. It's a huge department, and I'm sure it's easy to get, you know, kind of set aside "because the Department wants this," but I thought that they did a great job, and really voicing that role of our stakeholders and keeping it at the forefront for everyone."

- comment by an NC DHHS staff member

Suggested Actions:

Seen through the positive gains of having an intermediary organization to connect the community to the government, and vice versa, this model must continue to be implemented. Ensuring that an organization is championing community needs to the government is essential for an improved connection between the two going forward.

"I would hope that the partnership would continue with NC Counts. I really want that to continue, so that we can stay working in the community. So that we can stay building those connections with, like the local pharmacies and the health departments, other churches. Just everyone in the community was able to connect this with just about everybody. I mean because this was a new thing for everybody. So, yeah. I would hope that the partnership continues."

- comment by a Funding Recipient

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