

Public Health Modernization Builds Trust and Addresses Micronesian Islander Community Health Needs in Union County

When COVID-19 hit Union County, the Micronesian Islander Community of Oregon (MIC) sprang into action. People were hesitant to go grocery shopping, not wanting to risk exposure to COVID-19. So, MIC began hosting food-distribution events at a church frequented by members of Micronesian Islander communities. Then came the national toilet paper shortage, so MIC struck up a deal to source toilet paper from an international supplier, and focused their distribution efforts on reaching older adults in their communities. And when the COVID-19 vaccine became available, MIC reached out to Union County's local public health agency, the Center for Human Development, Inc. (CHD).

The organizations had partnered before. Pre-pandemic, CHD played an occasional role in MIC's events at Eastern Oregon University, tabling and offering students information about health resources available to them. But, the pandemic strengthened the relationship between the partners.

"It became really apparent that we would be more effective at meeting the needs of all our communities if we were working in partnership," said Carrie Brogoitti, CHD's director of public health. Over time, CHD became a supporting presence at many of MIC's events, offering health resources and vaccines. Community members who showed up to socialize or get a food box from MIC might leave having spoken with CHD staff about the importance of flu shots, or even having received the COVID-19 vaccine.

What does modernization mean to you?

Public health modernization funding gives organizations like MIC resources to better meet the immediate needs of their communities and to better support their communities over the long-term as concerns like heat and wildfires grow. As community health needs evolve, members of Eastern Oregon's Micronesian community know where to go for health services and other support.

"With public health modernization, MIC has been able to ensure that our community feels like there is a space for them, with information they want provided in their language. They are with people that they are either familiar with or people who look like them," said Jackie Leung, executive director for the community-based organization known as Micronesian Islander Community of Oregon or MIC.

"Our state system's investment in community-based organizations that have expertise and connections to smaller communities within our county has benefited residents here, 100 percent. Modernization is a newer concept, and it has connected us to so many people! I know that we're going to achieve better health outcomes in Union County because of this approach and investment," added Carrie Brogoitti, director of public health for Union County's Center for Human Development, Inc (CHD).

A particularly successful event that CHD and MIC put on in partnership with Oregon Health Authority (OHA) was a two-day vaccination clinic at a senior center in Union County. On the first day, OHA administered vaccines, and MIC handed out food boxes filled with culturally-specific food items. On day two, CHD gave the vaccines and MIC served hot food to guests.

“When people go to spaces where they don’t see anyone who looks like them, they’re going to feel out of place. Hosting [vaccine] events that are specifically for members of Union County’s Micronesian Islander community, where there’s food and people they are familiar with, has been extremely important.”

– Jackie Leung, director of MIC



Finding Connection in a Lively Lobby Leads to Better Health

As the pandemic continued, opportunities for partnership expanded. Northeast Oregon Network (NEON)—a community organization who offers health information and resources to Union County residents in Spanish and Marshallese, and who frequently partners with MIC—reached out to CHD about using their lobby to host a vaccination and resource event.

Brogioitti recalled coming in to help at the event and finding that CHD’s lobby had become a hang-out space. The lobby bustled with people chatting, eating food and having fun: the scene was much livelier than one might expect from an event where people were getting shots. “Probably 40 people came in on a Friday night,” she recounted. “I don’t know that I’ve ever had that experience. It definitely feels like a shift in our community.” CHD administered the vaccines and provided health resources, but the success of the event came from NEON and other community-based organizations like MIC getting the word out to their communities.

As members of Union County’s Micronesian Islander community found connection in the health department lobby, a baseline of trust formed, making it easier for them to access services offered by CHD.

In turn, CHD’s staff was able to connect with the community through their community partners, and communities felt more comfortable coming to CHD. Supporting CBOs like MIC and NEON in taking the lead on these events helped improve health outcomes and reduce inequities among the people they serve.

“When I remind people who may be apprehensive about reaching out to CHD for services that these are the same staff who were at the vaccine events, they remember working with those folks and understand that they are nice people,” said Rubyna Hemon, a community outreach worker from MIC.

With Modernization, the Future is Bright – and Mobile

These partnerships inform CHD's current approach to meeting community needs. As CHD's focus shifts from COVID-19 response to increasing disaster preparedness in Union County, the emphasis on meeting people where they are continues. CHD purchased a "Mobile Health Van" that public health staff use in a variety of ways, including reaching smaller communities throughout Union County. The van makes the rounds at events throughout the county, including visiting a local park where staff distribute free backpacks with heat-related preparedness items like bottles, cooling cloths, sunscreen and sunglasses to children.

Organizations like MIC help spread the word about the van to their communities, and in turn, communities welcome the CHD van into local spaces.

"One of the biggest things we've heard is that, if we had not gone out, these members of our community would have never gotten a flu shot, or COVID vaccine or a food box."

- Gretchen Kellerman,
former emergency
preparedness
coordinator at CHD

CHD plans to continue using the Mobile Health Services Van to deliver items that meet immediate needs, in hopes of helping people prepare longer term plans for issues like summer heat and wildfire.

"I am just so grateful to have had the chance to learn so much about our community through this new approach. There are perceptions about our community in northeastern Oregon—perceptions that I probably even had myself—about who lives here. I am so grateful to our community partners. And, I want other people to know that we have this wonderful, diverse, Pacific Islander community in Union County. I think people don't understand how diverse the state of Oregon is, especially where we live."

- Carrie Brogoitti, director of
public health at CHD