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Reinforcing Disability Inclusion for COVID-19 Vaccine Access through Collaboration with Centers for Independent Living: **Successes and Lessons Learned**

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(<https://acphd.org/>)



Background

Alameda County, California is in the San Francisco Bay Area, occupying much of the East Bay region. The Alameda County Public Health Department (ACPHD) is accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) and serves more than 1.6 million residents in 14 incorporated cities, six unincorporated communities, and rural areas.* Public health emergencies like COVID-19 have highlighted the importance of collaboration across numerous sectors, organizations and disciplines to address the needs of all people, including people with disabilities.

Centers for Independent Living (CILs) and local health departments (LHDs) both support the health of people with disabilities living in their jurisdictions in different ways. CILs are operated by and for people with disabilities and provide tools and resources to allow them to participate fully in society. Effective collaboration between CILs and LHDs is crucial to ensure that people with disabilities receive adequate, effective, timely, accessible and culturally appropriate services and support. While the ACPHD has a full-time staff member in the role of Developmental Disabilities Coordinator within the Family Health Services Department, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an unprecedented amount of community planning and outreach to ensure vaccine access. As a result, ACPHD applied for and received a grant from NACCHO to assist them in increasing vaccine access for people with disabilities.

Project Description

ACPHD partnered with its local CILs, the Center for Independent Living in Berkeley and the Community Resources for Independent Living in Hayward, to address COVID-19 vaccination access for people with disabilities. Through their collaboration, they were able to identify mutually beneficial tasks relatively quickly. The roles and responsibilities for the partnership were divided naturally, with ACPHD taking on tasks such as providing a phone guide for referrals, sharing information about their programs and providing pop-up vaccination clinics while the CILs focused on community engagement and outreach presentations to their members. Another key component of the project was developing an Action Plan with the following goals: 1) host at least three informational sessions at each CIL for people with disabilities by the end of 2023, and 2) create a referral guide for CILs to ACPHD/County programs by June 2023. The plan outlines specific action steps, activities, a timeline, benchmarks and achievements, roles and responsibilities and budget implications.

Challenges

- **Time and Staffing:** Even with a dedicated staff person, finding the time to attend regular working meetings together can be difficult.
- **Relationship Gaps:** With only one LHD staff member attending meetings with CILs, if they leave the organization, so does that institutional knowledge and relationship.

Solutions

To overcome time and staffing challenges, ACPHD points to the value of the Action Plan they developed. Establishing concrete goals, measures, and a timeline formalizes the partnership with the CIL or CILs and holds staff accountable to sustain the momentum.

To overcome potential relationship gaps, ACPHD began bringing additional staff to engage with the CILs during their meetings. Having multiple points of contact from the LHD meet CIL leadership strengthened the relationships between the two organizations.

Results

ACPHD has reinvigorated and reinforced its relationship with their local CILs, expanding their collaboration and developing enriching educational opportunities for their constituents. The conversations generated through the Action Plan brought about new educational opportunities for people with disabilities. For example, an LHD staff member from the nutrition department led a talk with CIL members on how to manage diabetes, hypertension, and other health conditions through diet.

The Way Forward

A future in-person presentation from an ACPHD staff member to CIL members will focus on California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal— known as CalAIM— a multi-year plan to transform California's Medi-Cal program and to make it integrate more seamlessly with other social services to assist those with the most complex needs. In addition, ACPHD will continue their COVID-19 information sessions, touching on bivalent boosters and how the landscape may change as the state of emergency precautions recede. Beyond the Action Plan, ACPHD looks to engage with CILs for emergency preparedness planning and digital inclusion for people with disabilities and lower incomes.

Key Takeaways

- Generous sharing of information, resources and ideas between organizations can eliminate silos and support collaboration for greater success.
- Having a third-party facilitator lead Action Plan discussions can take the pressure off any one organization and foster consensus-building.
- Before health department staff meet with a CIL, know the mission of CILs and the history of the Independent Living Movement.



Words of Wisdom

“It does not necessarily require a large budget or funding, but rather a willingness to engage and work together to find solutions. Building relationships and partnerships with CILs can lead to new projects and initiatives that benefit the community. I think that it takes getting folks together in a room to talk about some of the things that they’re working on and ideas naturally stem from that.” —Benjamin Chen, Developmental Disabilities Coordinator, ACPHD, Developmental Disabilities Planning and Advisory Council

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**Alameda County’s incorporated cities are Alameda, Albany, Berkeley, Dublin, Emeryville, Fremont, Hayward, Livermore, Newark, Oakland (the county seat), Piedmont, Pleasanton, San Leandro, and Union City. The unincorporated communities are Ashland, Castro Valley, Cherryland, Fairview, San Lorenzo, and Sunol.*