

Leveraging a Regional Coalition to Create a Coordinated COVID-19 Response for Farmworkers

Outreach Promising Practice

The COVID-19 Response Steering Committee formed by Family Health La Clinica (FHLC) and the Wisconsin Farmworker Coalition created a coordinated approach to mitigate COVID-19 transmission risk, bolster vaccination efforts, and expand the reach of services to the farmworker population.

Organizations:

- Family Health La Clinica (FHLC)
- Wisconsin Farmworker Coalition (WFC): an advocacy organization for the migrant and seasonal farmworkers and other agricultural workers in Wisconsin
- Location: Wautoma, Wisconsin



About:

Established in 1973, Family Health La Clinica (FHLC) is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) and is the only federally-designated Migrant Health Center serving Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Workers (MSAW) in Wisconsin. FHLC provides primary medical care to farmworker patients at its clinic locations and throughout the state via a Mobile Health Center. Services are delivered directly to workers at migrant housing camps, worksites, and other sites easily accessed by farmworkers.

FHLC has a long history of serving this population throughout the state and has fostered partnerships in agriculture through participation in the Wisconsin Farmworkers Coalition (WFC), which has been incorporated as a statewide, issue-oriented coalition since 1998. FHLC was uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of Wisconsin's farm workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the need for food assistance, transportation, mental health resources, and computer literacy grew in the farmworker community.

Unmet Need Addressed:

Given the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Wisconsin Farmworker Coalition and other key stakeholders urgently needed to effectively mitigate the risk of COVID-19 among the farmworker population without duplicating efforts and using limited resources efficiently. As a result, the Coalition's COVID-19 Response Steering Committee was created, and FHLC led and chaired the Steering Committee.

The Coalition's COVID-19 Response Steering Committee formalized partnerships between like-minded organizations and government agencies by meeting regularly to keep communications open, sharing timely information, and collecting and disseminating partner resources to the farmworker population. By formalizing these relationships, the Steering Committee created a network that effectively coordinated efforts and could quickly address an ever-changing emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Description of the Practice:

The development of the COVID-19 Response Steering Committee formalized partnerships among community-based organizations and enabled a swift response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that protected Wisconsin farmworkers and their families. FHLC established a charter with other community-based organizations, which enabled families to access COVID-19 care and other community-based resources.

Key Strategies:

FHLC's outreach program was multifaceted before the COVID-19 pandemic, consisting of outreach to employers, a mobile clinic to provide healthcare access to farmworkers, and resource sharing within the Wisconsin Farmworker Coalition, all the while functioning as the only Migrant Health Center in the State of Wisconsin. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, FHLC and the WFC built upon existing efforts and relationships to create formal partnerships by drafting a charter for their collaborative efforts. The goal of this charter was to expand access to services for farmworker communities and allow organizations to respond quickly and cohesively to COVID-19 response efforts.



Development of Formal Charter

The charter established by FHLC and WFC for the COVID-19 Response Steering Committee formalized collaborative networks and uplifted the voices of farmworkers through consistent advocacy for education, information sharing, and optimal working conditions. The priorities of this group included:

- Education
 - Supporting advocacy and education efforts on issues impacting Wisconsin's farmworker community
- Information Sharing
 - Disseminating information amongst members
 - Seeking resources to support its collaborative programs
 - Coordinating and referring services amongst partner organizations
- Improving Access to Services
 - Identifying and addressing gaps in social and health services
 - Developing collaborative outreach strategies
 - Identifying and prioritizing the healthcare needs of Wisconsin's farmworkers and developing healthcare access strategies
 - Developing and implementing joint program efforts and more effective utilization of existing healthcare resources
 - Engaging in ongoing assessment and planning to ensure members are addressing the needs of workers and their families

Meeting Facilitation

FHLC coordinated the Steering Committee meetings and was responsible for disseminating the meeting minutes and agenda to all members. Meetings accommodated video conference/phone attendance, with the intent of offering in-person attendance as public health guidance allowed. The WFC Committee Chair facilitated the meetings. Accountability was kept through regular management and follow-up of agenda items.

Creating a committee and a charter between partner organizations made it possible to establish regularly scheduled, formal meetings and streamline information sharing through email and Microsoft Teams. The newly formed committee also created formal information sharing between organizations and farmworker communities, by including folders of information from partners distributed by FHLC. These folders included flyers and brochures of services offered by committee members with content that was clear and concise, at appropriate reading levels, and culturally sensitive.



Expanded Services

Because the committee included organizations serving the broader farmworker population, FHLC and WFC expanded and offered services to a broader range of agricultural workers, including H-2A workers and year-round agricultural workers such as meat and dairy workers. FHLC and WFC also expanded services to farmworkers of different ethnicities such as Hmong, Haitian, Mixtec and Khmer farmworkers. FHLC and the Coalition needed to establish communication between farmworkers and service organizations to extend resources to this wider range of farmworkers.

In response to this need, FHLC hired a Community Health Coordinator and purchased HubSpot CRM, a customer relations management software that allowed FHLC to keep track of communication between growers and the outreach team. FHLC hired a small, seasonal team of bilingual outreach staff. These new staff members enhanced outreach efforts by collecting information regarding vaccine hesitancy and documenting the needs of farmworkers while also serving as health educators and building trust among service organizations and the community.

“Through coordinated efforts with the Wisconsin Farmworkers Coalition and the COVID-19 Response Steering Committee, Family Health La Clinica expanded service delivery from 400 farmworkers to over 3,000 farmworkers throughout the state of Wisconsin during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

– Netzali Pacheco Rojas
Practice Manager, Mobile Services

The committee saw a substantial increase in farmworkers served over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase was partly due to the implementation of Emergency Rule 2014, an order of the Wisconsin Department Workforce Development, which stated that employers must be accountable to provide safe working conditions and practice COVID-19 mitigation strategies to protect their workers. This ruling encouraged a symbiotic relationship between FHLC and employers to offer COVID-19 risk mitigation practices. Many employers embraced the work of FHLC to keep their staff healthy and protected. The expansion of services was made possible by combining the committee's diligent work and the emergency funding that allowed the scale-up of services.



Key Challenges and How to Address Them:

Partner Management and Meeting Facilitation

Scaling operations at such a fast pace required incredible coordination between partners. FHLC found that management and facilitation of meetings with partners became challenging as participation expanded and information about the COVID-19 pandemic changed and was updated rapidly.

To address this, FHLC recommends hiring a Project Manager to facilitate and coordinate coalition meetings. Due to funding, FHLC was not able to hire for this role. Instead, the Wisconsin Farmworker Coalition established specific committees to which they leveled responsibilities among organizations. Specific subcommittee topics included:

- Dairy Workers and Vulnerable Populations
- Communication Strategy
- Education Resources
- Isolation/Housing Planning
- Outreach
- Safe Service Access

Dedicated Funding for Personnel

Reaching a large, statewide population also created a need for additional outreach workers. While FHLC was able to procure a seasonal outreach team and received grant funding to hire a Community Health Coordinator, this funding was temporary. Dedicated funding for outreach continues to be a key challenge for FHLC..



Pictured: representatives from the COVID-19 Response Steering Committee, including WIC, Madison College and the Wisconsin Department of Instruction's Migrant Education Program

Resources Needed and Expenses:

Emergency COVID-19 grant funding was key to FHLC and WFC's response and expansion. In April 2020, the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin (AHW) Endowment awarded \$322,420 to FHLC for a nine-month project period (April 2020 through January 2021). The project's main focus was to develop a cohesive response to prevent and minimize the transmission risk of COVID-19 amongst MSAWs and their employers throughout Wisconsin. FHLC also received emergency funding from the State of Wisconsin to provide mass testing to MSAWs.

With these two distinct funding streams, FHLC built and implemented its comprehensive COVID-19 Risk Mitigation project to address worksite and housing assessments, education, COVID-19 screening, and testing for SARS-CoV-2.

To support the work of the coalition and the demand for services due to the COVID-19 pandemic, FHLC hired a Community Health Coordinator and a small, seasonal team of bilingual outreach staff. Additionally, FHLC purchased the HubSpot CRM software to keep track of communication between growers and the outreach team.



A Wisconsin farmworker receives a COVID-19 vaccination.

Partnerships:

Partnerships with FHLC and the COVID-19 Response Steering Committee included representatives from:

- United Migrant Opportunity Services (UMOS)
- Department of Workforce Development (DWD)
- Department of Public Instruction (DPI)
- Legal Action of Wisconsin
- Midwest Food Products Association
- Seven (7) Public Health Entities:
 - Portage County Public Health Department
 - City of Markesan
 - Green Lake County Health Department
 - Fond du Lac County Health Department
 - Adams County Health Department
 - St. Croix Public Health Department
 - Washington Ozaukee Public Health Department
 - Waushara County Health Department
- State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC)
- Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association (WPHCA)
- Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action Program (SWCAP)
- Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA)

Results:

FHLC's coordinated efforts, with WFC and the COVID-19 Response Steering Committee, to expand partnerships and the reach of services for farmworkers saw an increase in service delivery from 400 to over 3,000 farmworkers between 2019 and 2020.

Additionally, FHLC and WFC were able to expand services to include dairy workers and provide health services, COVID-19 tests, and vaccinations at workplaces. Recently, their efforts have shown successful outcomes in the low COVID-19 case rate among the farmworker population. The 2021 season was a huge success for FHLC and WFC: after conducting 2,600 COVID-19 tests, only 18 tests were positive (< 1% positivity rate).

Looking forward, the work of the COVID-19 Response Steering Committee will continue in regular, twice-a-month meetings during the growing season and monthly off-season meetings. This ongoing collaboration will continue with information sharing and implementation of best practices with the possibility of the development of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to solidify the work of the Committee.

Learn More:

- Wisconsin Farmworkers Coalition website: <https://wisconsinfwcoalition.org/>
- Family Health La Clinica website: <https://www.famhealth.org/>

Contact:

- Aida Bise, Director of Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Services
 - aida.bise@famhealth.org

Tools and Resources:

HubSpot CRM: This software is utilized primarily to keep track of correspondence between growers/employers and the FHLC outreach team. Additionally, the software is used to track and organize events. In these instances, HubSpot CRM is used to organize groups that may be arriving at an event (i.e., vaccine clinic, educational opportunity, etc.) at varied intervals. FHLC uses this software to collect organizational contact information, schedule posts for social media, and employer management. The software records instances of communication between the organization and employers. This allows FHLC's team to track communication and follow-up activities.



Pro tip:

Connect with like-minded organizations in your region. Partnering with other organizations serving farmworkers bolsters information sharing and resource development and increases the reach of services. Establishing formal coalitions builds regional preparedness and strengthens the ability of organizations to respond to emergencies.

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