

Overview

In Lancaster, Pennsylvania, existing cross-sector community partnerships have been crucial to combating the public health crises arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Lancaster County does not have a public health department, the area's largest health care provider, Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health (LG Health), has worked with a variety of community organizations in several different coalitions to focus on the dimensions of community health improvement.

[Lanc Co MyHome](#), a cross-sector collaboration housed at LG Health, was established in 2009 to help people experiencing homelessness in Lancaster County. This coalition brings together more than 200 partners from health care, housing, government agencies and human services organizations to help people experiencing homelessness.

The efforts of Lanc Co MyHome are particularly important at this time because housing affects many aspects of COVID-19 prevention and treatment. With high unemployment due to the pandemic, many people are at risk for eviction and homelessness. In addition, residents of crowded, low-income housing and shelters do not have the ability to adequately practice social distancing, potentially hastening the spread of the virus. Lancaster County knows these challenges, so Lanc Co MyHome and LG Health are working together to address them.

Approach

During the pandemic, the coalition is working with partners to extend seasonal shelters, add portable bathrooms and handwashing stations, arrange



new grab-and-go meal sites, open a day center and establish a quarantine site. LG Health also is working closely with shelters to implement best practices recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to protect the homeless population.

LG Health also developed special processes to quickly identify, treat and prevent the spread of COVID-19 among specific vulnerable populations. Self-isolation during waiting periods may be more challenging for these populations than for others. In response, during the early weeks of the pandemic, LG Health launched a system to ensure that individuals without a permanent address can receive an expedited COVID-19 test. The health system also is expanding its courtesy transportation program during the pandemic. As part of this program, community organizations serving individuals experiencing homelessness can contact LG Health to arrange a ride to a COVID-19 testing site, or to the area's quarantine site for individuals who are sick. Rides are provided by trained health professionals using wheelchair-equipped vans that are thoroughly disinfected after each trip.



Impact

At the onset of the pandemic, it was important to ensure that community meals remained available for individuals experiencing homelessness. Lanc Co MyHome worked with local partners to find faith-based and community organizations to coordinate donations of grab-and-go food items. With these donations, three meals are offered every day of the week, and an additional lunchtime meal has been added Monday through Friday.

The quarantine site was secured within the first week of the pandemic and has been a success in keeping the number of people experiencing homelessness who test positive for COVID-19 extremely low. To date, only two people — one in an emergency shelter and one unsheltered (living on the streets) — have tested positive for COVID-19. Quarantine services are offered to individuals living in one of the emergency shelters or living on the streets who are awaiting COVID-19 test results or have tested positive. Transportation services have taken individuals to testing and quarantine sites quickly, ensuring that the potential for the virus to spread remains low. For individuals in quarantine, Lanc Co MyHome provides three meals a day, check-in calls with case managers twice a day and additional calls from medical personnel to monitor the progress of their illness. Lanc Co MyHome is the only homeless coalition to open a quarantine site within South Central Pennsylvania.

The coalition's day center opened within a few weeks of an increase of COVID-19 cases in Lancaster County, at a time when the state's stay-at-home order

precluded individuals from going inside to get out of bad weather. In partnership with a local church and a local nonprofit, the day center has been able to serve between 20 to 30 people a day and offers on-site drug and alcohol counseling, connection to social and housing services, snacks and clothing. It also provides a sense of community for a group of individuals who have been so marginalized that a sense of belonging has been nonexistent.

Recently, a low-barrier overnight shelter, with minimal requirements for entry, opened to serve individuals who are challenging to bring inside. This important initiative allows Lanc Co MyHome to build trusting relationships by meeting one of the basic needs people have. Additionally, it allows individuals to get out of areas where people are congregating and reduce potential exposure to COVID-19. To date, an average of 12 people have used the shelter per night.

Lessons Learned

- Commitment to community health and health equity are essential during a public health crisis. Focusing on individuals who are most vulnerable and ensuring that everyone in the community can take recommended prevention measures are crucial for controlling the spread of COVID-19.
- This commitment is bolstered by making community health improvement part of the DNA of the health system and its board. As Carolyn F. Scanlan, vice chair of the LG Health board of trustees, noted in an [AHA Trustee Insights Viewpoint article](#), LG Health's executive leaders actively participate on numerous community boards of directors and coalitions to address issues that challenge the community, modeling and supporting this commitment for all employees.
- As always, trusting partnerships are the key to making impact. Time invested in building partnerships over time pays off in times of crisis, when partners can come together quickly to create solutions to problems when every day is crucial to prevent rapid spread of a pandemic.



- In times of crisis, new people and organizations are looking to help and pull together in a community. If there is strong planning in place ahead of time, new partners can be directed to opportunities where gaps exist or supplemental services are needed.
- Having a strategic plan and set of community experts on an issue such as homelessness is helpful when a crisis requires a quick response. Thus far, taking action rapidly has kept the disease rate low for people experiencing homelessness in Lancaster County.

Future Goals

Lanc Co MyHome has been able to stand up more than five major initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating that approaching a problem with clear, common goals can result in rapid program development and implementation.


The coalition will continue to run the quarantine site until there is a combination of lower disease rates and a vaccine, given that homeless individuals typically experience multiple comorbid diseases and consequently are most vulnerable. The day center and overnight shelter will be open for the foreseeable future.

Lanc Co MyHome also will launch a 24-hour street outreach program in the immediate future. This new program comes from lessons learned during the pandemic about how to develop relationships with individuals living on the streets and engage them in services. Again, in this space, LG Health is approaching the problem differently, using those learnings and responding to the community.

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