

DeafHealth September 2023 Focus Group Findings

Background. This report summarizes focus group findings conducted as part of an activity from the Minnesota Department of Health's COVID-19 Community Engagement and Diverse Media grant. Findings are based on a focus group that was held virtually on September 12, 2023 for one hour with eight participants who identified themselves primarily as deaf. The focus group explored insights and experiences from Deaf Minnesotans on the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination efforts, namely participants' experiences receiving related information. Focus group discussions revealed four overarching themes. The themes predominantly address accessibility and trust.

Theme 1: Need for a Centralized, Accessible Hub. Participants accessed information from various and diverse sources, including friends and family (word of mouth), employers, schools, televised news, Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDI) in government briefings, social media (e.g. Facebook groups), YouTube, dedicated Deaf news shows in ASL (e.g. the Daily Moth), and non-profit organizations. Participants thusly identified a need for a centralized, one-stop resource center in ASL to help reduce anxiety and confusion, while providing a reliable point of contact. Participants also recognized a preference for communication via mobile phones as a valuable means of receiving information, aligning with modern communication preferences.

Theme 2: Desire for Unbiased and Transparent Information. Trust in information was a resounding and reoccurring concern, with participants expressing difficulty in assessing the truth of news and the potential influence of political agendas. Participants expressed a strong desire for unbiased and transparent information, suggesting only a few, qualified trusted sources like the CDC or WHO. The need for transparency extended to future outbreaks, with participants emphasizing the importance of clear, honest information about evolving situations.

Theme 3: Appeal for Cultural and Linguistic Appropriateness. Concerns were raised about the lack of an ASL equivalent on the CDC website and other federal and state government sources, emphasizing the ongoing importance of culturally and linguistically appropriate information for the Deaf community. Plain language, whether in ASL or English, was emphasized for simplicity, especially for underprivileged and underserved communities. Additionally, the inclusion of visual aids (such as red to demonstrate risk and green to demonstrate safety), as well as visual descriptions was advocated for better accessibility and understanding, especially for the DeafBlind community.

Theme 4: A Right to Advocacy and Bridging Gaps with Public Officials. Participants expressed a need to connect with authorities to communicate critical gaps experienced by their communities, reflecting a desire for more inclusive and tailored communication strategies.

Discussion and Implications: These themes collectively reflect Deaf Minnesotans' experiences, challenges, and preferences related to accessing information during the COVID-19 pandemic. They offer insights into their long-term expectations for future health crises. Notably, the reliance on varied information sources indicates a decentralized information landscape. While diversity is valuable, the lack of a centralized hub may lead to information fragmentation, potentially causing confusion and misunderstanding. The reoccurring concern about trust in information also suggests a need for enhanced credibility and transparency in communication channels. Participants' preference for trusted sources like the CDC and WHO indicates a desire for authoritative and unbiased information. Concerns about the lack of ASL equivalents on official websites and sources underscore the need for inclusivity. Emphasizing cultural and linguistic appropriateness, while recognizing the diverse communication needs within the community, is essential for effective communication. Lastly, participants have an ongoing desire to connect with authorities, highlighting the importance of community engagement and collaboration in addressing such information gaps. This aligns with a broader call for more inclusive and tailored communication strategies for the Deaf community in Minnesota.