

## DeafHealth Winter 2024 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 December 6, 2023 for one hour or via 1:1 interviews 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, specifically in regards to participants' experiences with receiving information and services for vaccination. Focus group discussions revealed that the four themes previously identified from a prior focus group continued to serve as re-occurring themes: a need for a centralized and accessible hub, desire for unbiased and transparent information, appeal for cultural and linguistic appropriateness, and a right to advocacy and bridging gaps with public officials. In this focus group, three new overarching themes emerged, predominantly addressing autonomy and inclusiveness.

*Theme 1: Need for Tailored, Accessible Communication Strategies.* Participants faced challenges in navigating rapidly evolving vaccine-related information that adequately accounted for their individual circumstances, including age, medical history, pre-existing conditions, or medication use. Participants' individual circumstances influenced how they received and assessed vaccine-related information. Some encountered difficulty in finding readily-available information in American Sign Language (ASL) tailored to their current health, such as specific information on vaccine side effects and boosters. Consequently, participants instead often relied on information and guidance from family members with clinical healthcare experience, their workplace, and healthcare providers. Participants expressed a desire for clear and accessible resources in both English and ASL, so that they can independently and autonomously research and understand the implications of vaccines on their own health.

*Theme 2: Standardize Access to Interpreters and Accommodations.* Participant experiences were extremely varied in receiving ASL interpreters and/or other accommodations during information sessions and vaccine administration at vaccination events, clinics, or pharmacies. Participants noted that access to interpreters and support services during vaccine administration needs to be enhanced and standardized, by providing high-quality accommodations in the first place as well as ensuring that these services' availability is communicated effectively to deaf individuals seeking vaccination and information.

*Theme 3: Desire for Consistent and Current Information.* In the beginning of the pandemic, participants noted that information dissemination on vaccines was rapidly evolving, leading to confusion and difficulty in identifying and finding information that was current and relevant. Participants had concerns about the reliability and currency of information; for example, resources that were accessible were not up-to-date, thus rendering the accessible information outdated and

ineffective. The fast-paced nature of information dissemination from public health officials and authorities pose challenges in ensuring equitable provision of readily-available and accessible information for deaf individuals. Participants emphasize that accessible resources must remain updated to meet evolving needs and empower deaf individuals' autonomy in decision-making.

**Discussion and Implications:** These themes collectively reflect Deaf Minnesotans' experiences, challenges, and preferences related to accessing vaccination-related information and services during the COVID-19 pandemic. They offer insights into their long-term expectations for future health crises. Participants consistently pointed out the benefits of accessing such information and services in American Sign Language among other accommodations. However, such information and services may not be standardized, reliable, or current, consequently undermining deaf individuals' autonomy. There is the need for tailored communication that meets different individuals' needs based on their individual health circumstances, which is essential to provide comprehensive information necessary for informed decision-making. Providing consistent and current accessible information is paramount, necessitating efforts to address the fast-paced nature of information dissemination from public health officials and ensure that such accessible resources remain updated. Standardizing access to interpreters and accommodations during vaccine information sessions and administration remains a top priority to ensure consistent and equitable access to healthcare services. These future implications underscore the importance of adopting inclusive practices to ensure autonomy in healthcare and promote health equity for deaf Minnesotans where each person is well-informed and not left behind.