

DeafHealth April 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 during the first week of April in 2024 for one hour with eight participants who identified themselves primarily as deaf. The focus group was conducted to gather insights, particularly regarding treatment, recovery, long COVID, and the COVID-19 antiviral medication Paxlovid.

Theme 1: Lack of Awareness and Understanding of Paxlovid. Many participants expressed that they were unaware of Paxlovid until consulting their doctors. However, even upon consultation, there was a lack of understanding about its side effects due to the absence of public and accessible information. Consequently, participants were left ill-equipped to ask pertinent questions about the medication. Those with regular Primary Care Physicians (PCPs) reported better access to care, including ASL interpreters, while others did not receive necessary accommodations. This disparity led to a sense of uncertainty and unpreparedness among participants.

Theme 2: Visual Communication Needs. Participants emphasized the importance of visual communication aids, such as graphics or pictures, particularly for Deaf individuals from families where American Sign Language (ASL) is not the primary language. Most participants suggested the use of visuals to depict symptoms rather than relying solely on written descriptions. Additionally, participants advocated for doctors to be prepared to offer visuals during consultations, enhancing mutual understanding. The need for Deaf individuals to explicitly request visual aids during medical interactions was highlighted to improve communication.

Theme 3: Call for Dedicated Health Resources. Participants expressed a desire for a dedicated "Health News for Deaf" website, similar to The Daily Moth, but with expanded resources and funding. They envisioned a platform offering information in various formats, catering to different levels of comprehension and linguistic preferences. Furthermore, participants stressed the importance of having medical professionals proficient in ASL, citing individuals like Dr. IV Mirus, as valuable resources. Real-time access to public health information in both English and ASL was deemed essential to ensure the timely dissemination of critical information.

Theme 4: Unique Black Deaf Experience. A poignant finding was the unique experience of Black Deaf individuals within the broader Deaf community. Participants highlighted the rich intersectionalities of Deaf communities, underscoring the need for culturally competent and inclusive healthcare services. Without adequate access to information, participants described feelings of fear and isolation, emphasizing the imperative of addressing these disparities to promote health equity.

Discussion and Implications. The focus group findings underscore the importance of targeted communication strategies, access to culturally competent care, and dedicated resources for Deaf communities. Addressing these needs is crucial to ensuring equitable access to healthcare information and services, particularly in the context of emerging treatments such as Paxlovid, and especially considering the possibility of future public health crises. Efforts to enhance awareness, provide visual communication aids, and promote inclusivity are vital steps toward improving health outcomes for Deaf individuals.