

RECERT COVID-19 Communications Projects

In July 2020, Ramsey County's COVID-19 Racial Equity and Community Engagement Response Team (RECERT) awarded \$300,000 to 27 contractors for a first round of two separate culturally specific and focused media and messaging-related funding opportunities for trusted messengers, community and local media agencies. This funding was made possible by the appropriation to Ramsey County under the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

The contractors replicated or redesigned COVID-19 media and communication messaging and/or resources provided by Ramsey County in order to provide culturally specific, relevant, linguistically appropriate, accurate and timely messages and communication related to COVID-19 to racially, ethnically and culturally diverse communities in Ramsey County (i.e. African American/American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS), African Born, Latino/a, Native American and Asian/Pacific Islander).

One funding opportunity, *Media and Messaging*, contracted with 12 community agencies and individuals who prioritized a media platform (i.e. online, radio, print, social media, television) to distribute COVID-19 messaging and communications to a targeted community. The other funding opportunity, *Trusted Messenger*, contracted with 15 trusted messengers and community agencies to provide outreach, engagement, resource connection and referrals around COVID-19 messaging as well as community and county services and resources.

RECERT initiated evaluation of these efforts both to make improvements for future partnership opportunities as well as part of a broader coordinated effort to evaluate the impact of CARES funding spent by Ramsey County. Contractor evaluation reports, reflection sessions with contractors and county staff were used to understand the services and strategies employed for contractors, the perceived impact on target communities, successes and challenges for contractors and how Ramsey County can its contracting processes. The evaluation aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What proportion of funds went to support racially and ethnically diverse communities?
2. Who was served by the contractors and what services/strategies did they employ?
3. How well did RECERT reach the intended communities with these contracts?
4. What impact did the work have on the targeted residents/communities?
5. What were the successes and challenges for contractors?
6. How can Ramsey County improve its contracting processes to make them more accessible to community organizations?
7. How could the trusted messenger model be expanded across service teams?

The complete report is available on the [CARES Evaluation web page](#).

What We Learned

The partners had the following key accomplishments:

- All (100%) of the \$300,000 funding was provided to organizations within racially and ethnically diverse communities.

- Over 500,000 individuals were reached through Media and Messaging and over 100,000 Ramsey County residents were reached through the Trusted Messenger funding.¹ A number of partners noted that their reach extended beyond Ramsey County to across Minnesota and the United States or even a global audience.
- Worked with many different cultural and ethnic communities including African American/African Descendants of Slavery, African-born (Somali, Oromo, Nigerian, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Liberian), Asian (Hmong, Karen, Karenni, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao), Latino/x American Indian, White and mixed culture communities.

Successes and Impact on Target Communities

Partners under both contracts were successful with this funding and reported key strategies that facilitated their success. Partners engaged effectively with their target populations, including hard-to-reach communities, and their activities were well-received by communities. Common successful strategies reported by partners included collaboration, working with community leaders and use of phone calls to reach elders and other isolated community members.

Partners believe they had an impact in a number of areas, including increase in knowledge and protective behaviors around COVID-19 risks, prevention, testing and management. Clients were connected with county and community services, many of whom would have otherwise gone without services and resources during this time. Partners also reported providing emotional support related to the impact of COVID-19 and increasing participation in the Census and voter registration.

Strengths

Ramsey County is a leader across jurisdictions in the U.S. around meeting a critical need by targeting messaging and prevention in racially and ethnically diverse communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Partners were treated as experts in their own communities and given a significant amount of flexibility and empowerment to best meet the needs of their communities. Many partners engaged in collaboration and strategic alliances and developed creative and culturally appropriate approaches to their messaging.

RECERT leadership, in collaboration with Ramsey County Contracting and Procurement were able to significantly simplify and speed up the solicitation and contracting process for these projects.

Barriers and Challenges

The tight timeframe for the use of CARES funding and urgent need to be responsive to the COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges in marketing the funding opportunity and timelines to carry out the work.

Partners reported a lot of confusion around the difference between the two contract types and many partners applied for both and often identified themselves as a Trusted Messenger even if they had a contract under the Media and Messaging project. In practice many partners carried out activities that fell under both project scopes. Other challenges included:

- Limited knowledge and capacity for some contractors around reimbursement-based contracts, general ledgers and invoicing.
- Need for more county capacity and support around prioritization of messaging, approval of materials and general technical assistance.
- Contractors adjusting to remote service delivery due to COVID-19 pandemic.

¹ Based on partner estimates. The count likely includes duplication as residents may have been reached by multiple partners.

- Potential duplication of efforts across contractors targeting the same cultural community

Round Two Improvements

Right as the contracts for Round One were wrapping up, RECERT leadership was actively planning for a second round of funding and quickly pivoted to incorporate learnings and feedback received from Round One into the design of Round Two. These changes address many of the barriers addressed above as well as recommendations laid out in the next section.

Recommendations

Short-term Recommendations

Below are recommendations for ongoing COVID-19 pandemic relief funding:

- Continue to fund communication and engagement efforts with BIPOC communities.
- Invest in long-term contracts or grants with partners so that they are able to carry out long-term communication and engagement strategies in their communities.
- Ensure internal capacity for supporting partners in the areas of technical assistance and review and approval of media materials, when required. In addition, provide support for collaboration and cohort development through the duration of contract.
- Encouraging more established organizations to collaborate with smaller grassroots efforts under a subcontractor model as a way to engage new partners in the work that may otherwise have barriers to applying for the funds.
- Coordinate with other jurisdictions funding similar efforts in order to reduce duplication and maximize reach of funds.

Long-term Recommendations

Below are general recommendations that can apply to all future contracting and procurement opportunities at Ramsey County.

- Shift from a transactional to relational model of contracting.
- Improve timely marketing of funding opportunities so that potential partners have time to learn about the funding opportunity and to prepare strong proposals.
- Use a third party for outreach and application assistance around funding opportunities.
- Simplify the solicitation process and use wording that is easy for respondents to understand.
- Provide additional support and information for the solicitation process.
- Support community organizations in becoming fiscal entities for smaller providers.
- Have more community representation on review of proposals.
- Provide education and orientation on contract and invoicing processes.
- Explore ways to provide advanced funds while maintaining accountability.