

Crush COVID and Vaccinate the Ocean State mini-grants: Working to empower organizations to keep communities safe and well-informed



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The Rhode Island Department of Health established a mini-grant program to support community-based organizations' efforts to provide a trusted source of COVID-19 information, supplies, and services to their community members. The organizations' innovative approaches engaged many Rhode Islanders who RIDOH likely would not have been able to reach alone.

The "What"

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, caseloads were elevated in Rhode Island's high-density, low income, and demographically diverse communities (HDCs). The Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) monitored case rates and later, vaccine uptake in these areas, and both measures consistently indicated that residents of these communities are more vulnerable to COVID-19. Community leaders of small cultural organizations expressed concerns that the state's infectious disease control guidance wasn't reaching their constituents in ways that were easy to understand. They also reported that the communities they served seemed generally confused about COVID-19 and lacked the supplies to protect themselves.

Many of these communities have histories of oppression that include conflict, discrimination, and/or exclusion by U.S. state or federal government entities, and/or by the governments in their countries of origin. These populations may have difficulty trusting government issued public

health guidance. The RIDOH COVID-19 Community Team decided that the best way to reach these communities was to empower the organizations which these communities already trusted to serve as messengers and distributors of personal protective equipment (PPE), COVID-19 test kits, and accurate public health information. To do this quickly and efficiently, RIDOH established two mini-grant programs, The Crush the COVID and Vaccinate the Ocean State Mini-Grants programs.

Recipients received mini-grants of \$495,603, distributed over three rounds for 24 months. They were required to submit a budget, project description/scope of work, and proposed evaluation plan. RIDOH reviewed applications and worked with recipients to register as vendors on state purchasing system, develop weekly reporting processes, build staff capacity, provide communications support, and establish a supply ordering and distribution system. To further support recipients, RIDOH held and orientation session; assigned each mini-grantee a technical assistance specialist who checked in with each project weekly; assessed training needs of the organizations' volunteers; organized filming of English and Spanish language trainings on proper use of PPE, social distancing, hand sanitizing and cleaning, and "COVID 101" with 4 physicians; and monitored weekly progress reporting and barriers faced.



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RIDOH funded

58
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based
organizations

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The “So What”

Mini-grants were distributed in three cycles to successful applicants, who conducted eight- to 12-week projects. RIDOH funded 58 community-based organizations to conduct 113 funded projects, 105 of which were completed. These organizations:

- Participated in a successful four-month statewide effort to distribute 500,000 COVID-19 self-tests to Island’s Social Vulnerability Index (SVI)-listed community members.
- Distributed 416,939 high quality masks to Rhode Island’s most vulnerable communities.
- Reported 38,791 one-on-one conversations with people who were hesitant about vaccination.
- Empowered at least 2,742 people to receive COVID-19 vaccines (some accompanied or transported community members, and many hosted vaccine clinics).
- Reported 93,854 additional COVID-19 community education contacts.

The Crush COVID and Vaccinate the Ocean State Mini-Grants programs were effective in reaching many of the Rhode Island’s SVI-listed populations, including but not limited to:

- Immigrants and Refugees
- Cultural communities (including Native American, African American, Hispanic, Haitian, Cape Verdean, Liberian, Central African, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese, Dominican, Colombian, and Portuguese communities)
- Unhoused Rhode Islanders
- LGBTQ community members
- Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim Rhode Islanders
- Veterans
- Youth living in HDCs
- Elderly
- Youth and adults with disabilities
- Low-income housing tenants’ associations
- Youth in Foster Care

Some innovative programs included:

- An outreach program targeting Spanish speaking employees of small and cultural businesses and their families (e.g., auto mechanics, hair and nail salon workers).
- Spanish language posters developed by graphic designers who interviewed key informants from specific cultures to select appropriate images, phrases and colors.
- Outreach through Spanish language Christian congregations, many of which are storefronts operated in HDCs.
- Partnership with Buddhist monks at temples serving Laotian and Cambodian communities.
- Creating peer education products such as a rap video written and performed by middle school age BIPOC youth and artistic billboards for pedestrian neighborhoods created by a middle and high school youth arts organization.
- Vaccine clinics organized and offered at cultural events or with cultural foods and music (these also encouraged in-person gathering as the state's vaccinated populations increased).
- Adding PPE and test kits with instructions to food boxes at weekly food distribution events.

The mini-grants programs were successful in leveraging the established trusting relationships that community members had with the organizations that normally serve or represent them to deliver accurate public health information, vaccines, test kits, and supplies. During the first two and a half years of the COVID-19 pandemic, RIDOH did not have time to form direct relationships with these communities. Working with the community-based organizations that people in these communities already knew and trusted allowed RIDOH to quickly get supplies and accurate information into the hands of about 10% of the people in the state.

Funded community-based organizations frequently reported that their mini-grant projects helped to prove their worth to their own communities, showing that they could be counted upon during a public health emergency to provide individuals and families with the information and supports many needed to safely survive the pandemic. The project also strengthened these organizations' trust in and relationship with RIDOH.

The "Now What"

Since this program depended upon federal pandemic relief funding, it is unlikely to be replicated on a large scale. However, as a direct result of the success of this project, at least four other RIDOH programs and one sub-awardee have begun utilizing mini-grants to improve their ability to reach these same underserved and SVI-listed populations. Seeking to continue partnering with RIDOH to serve their communities, several of the Crush COVID and Vaccinate the Ocean State mini-grantees are participating in those efforts.

Key contributors to this project include Jaime Comella, Rhode Island Department of Health.