



Dakota County Public Health Delivers Essential Services to Families in Need During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Kari Oldfield, Local Public Health Association of Minnesota Director

Local health departments have many responsibilities laid out in Minnesota statute, one of those responsibilities is responding to infectious diseases, and providing essential services is part of that. As a result, local public health has stepped in to play a leading role in protecting the health of communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To help prevent the virus from spreading, residents are asked to stay at home when they are infectious or have exposure to an infected person. This is called isolation or quarantine. Public health has a legal and ethical duty to assure that essential needs are addressed for individuals who are in isolation and quarantine.

“We provide essential services to residents in isolation or quarantine so they can successfully stay home and help prevent the spread of the disease,” said Amy Mimm, Dakota County Public Health Supervisor who is overseeing essential services for the county.

In Dakota County, essential services include delivery of food or cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment, and prescription medication. It also includes transportation to medical appointments, laundry services, connection to other resources, and help locating alternate housing for those who are unhoused or cannot stay in their own homes.

Addressing these needs follows the Minnesota Statute that states “The needs of persons isolated and quarantined shall be addressed in a systematic and competent fashion, including, but not limited to, providing adequate food, clothing, shelter, means of communication between those in isolation or quarantine and those outside these settings, medication, and competent medical care”.

“COVID-19 has really helped illustrate what we take for granted,” said Bonnie Brueshoff, Dakota County Public Health Director. “A quick trip to the store, doing a load of laundry; these simple things can become impossible when you are sick and have to be isolated in your home due to COVID-19.”

Dakota County Public Health re-directed staff to fill the many COVID-19-related response needs, including delivery of essential services. Dakota County Public Health has more than 20 staff working part- or full-time to deliver essential services to members of their communities in need. “Everyone has their regular job and then their COVID-19 job,” said Mimm. “This has become the new normal.”

“Our Public Health department has always been community-first,” added Brueshoff. “I am very proud of all the ways our essential services team members have stepped up to find new and creative ways to assist those in need.”

One goal of public health is to identify all individuals in the county who need essential services supports. “Most of our referrals come through the contact tracing process,” explained Mimm.

“Other referrals come from community partners” she said. “Everyone in the response, whether internal in Dakota County or external, has been responsive and nimble.”

“Dakota County also operates a COVID-19 Hotline, so when residents call that line asking for information on community resources, the Hotline Operator will assess if the resident is currently in isolation or quarantine and will then make a referral to essential services,” said Mimm.

A case investigator inquires with those who have positive cases or contact with an infected person to see if they have everything they need to remain home. If they do not, an assessment is conducted to learn about their specific needs and if support networks are available to help. If they can’t meet their needs through other means, local public health will intervene.

Delivery of essential services requires strong partnerships with community members. “At first, we were working with our food shelves to supply food to people and we had a nice partnership with them,” explained Mimm. Dakota County Public Health reevaluated the process to improve efficiency and as a result began using services such as InstaCart versus food shelves which are experiencing increased demand.

“We worked with a dietician in the [Woman, Infants, and Children] program to help us study what kind of food and how much was needed over a four-day period,” Mimm said. A food package was identified that is nutritional, easy to shop for, culturally sensitive, and could be delivered directly to families in Dakota County.

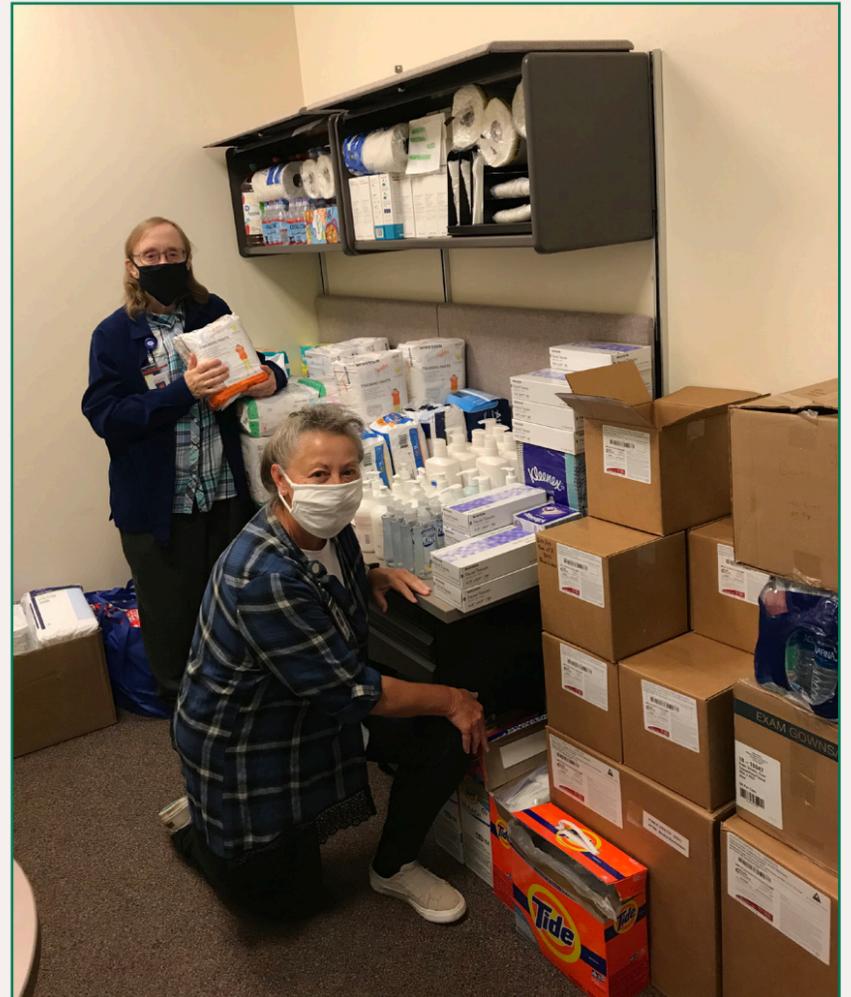
Providing access to laundry services is also important. Mimm explained that this helps keep people in hotels or multi-unit housing from using shared facilities while infectious. They worked to quickly establish a relationship with an outside agency to deliver this service.

“Public health departments are only as strong and effective as the partners they work with,” stated Brueshoff. “Fortunately, we’ve spent years – decades even – growing and fostering relationships with community groups that do outstanding work. I can’t say enough about how vital they’ve been to our efforts during this pandemic.

Another key service of local public health is delivering prescription medications to those in need. While in quarantine, residents may not have a regular pharmacy or the ability to pick up prescriptions. “We are working with families that don’t have health insurance or connection to a primary doctor,” said Mimm.

Community Health Workers in the county have also been critical for delivery of essential services. “[Community Health Workers] are still delivering personal protective equipment, masks, gloves, or cleaning supplies,” explained Mimm.

“We truly want to provide these essentials to any residents experiencing isolation or quarantine – we know it can already be a stressful experience, and we are grateful that they are doing the important work to help prevent further spread.” ■



Dakota County Public Health team members Vera Nelson (left) and Joyce Panasuk (right) prepare packages of essential goods for community members affected by COVID-19.