

# Minnesota Counties



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## Mower County Responds to Community COVID-19 Outbreak

By Kari Oldfield, Local Public Health Association of Minnesota Director

In Minnesota and across the nation, communities with food processing facilities have seen large case outbreaks of COVID-19. As food processing plants were being shut down across the country because of large outbreaks, Mower County public health worked diligently to prevent that.

"We wanted to work close together, so that didn't happen here in Austin," said Pam Kellogg, PHN, Mower County's Community Health Division Manager. "We knew that having two large plants in our community, it could be a potential problem, knowing what was going on nationally."



Mower County Public Health's Deb Brehmer, RN, checks in someone as they arrive for the county's COVID-19 testing event where over 2,000 people were tested in two days.

She noted that with more than 2,000 employees at food processing plants in the community, it was important to work with the plants, local health care providers, and community organizations to stop the spread of COVID-19.

"It has been confusing for businesses because guidance has changed over time," Kellogg said, noting many local businesses and the processing plants reached out to public health for help understanding guidance as it came down.

Although the plants were taking measures to prevent COVID-19 spreading within the work environment, local public health noted there was spread among families and those who carpooled together. Kellogg said, "There is also a lot of communal living, and it would take just one person, and it would spread to the whole rest of the family."

As case numbers quickly climbed, the public health department coordinated with the Mayo Clinic, the local plants and other community partners to launch several large-scale testing events.

One of the first events was held in a parking lot at the plant. Mayo provided the testing personnel and local public health registered individuals. They also coordinated with community organizations to ensure there were interpreters available for six different languages. The events were put together quickly, often in as little as four days. "It takes a lot of collaboration, and we had a lot of partners willing to collaborate with us," Kellogg said.

They noticed quickly that they were struggling to get some individuals tested. "The goal was to get the employees to come through the testing site and the employee's families," said Kellogg. "The employees were tired of getting tested, many had already had multiple tests and rumors started going around that it wasn't a comfortable test to get done." They needed to try a different approach and met with the state's Emergency Operations Center (EOC), where they decided to launch a mobile testing site at the local fair ground.

As the first county outside of the metro-area to launch a wide-scale mobile testing site, they knew it would take a lot of manpower to execute but used some of the lessons learned in the metro to make their event a success. On Tuesday, planning started, and by Saturday the testing site was open.

Contracted medical personnel were brought in to do the testing, but the county had to come up with 20 people each day to greet, register, and direct people to the correct locations. They also assisted medical personnel and put together meals for the staff. "Probably the hardest was staffing, it was a Saturday and Sunday and it happened to be Father's Day weekend," said Kellogg. Not only did members of the health and human services team pitch in, but also staff from other county departments and spouses.

Another challenge was spreading the news about the event to make sure people came. Community leaders stepped in to help spread the news about the testing. The county EOC was also able to get permission from the state to use the phone warning system to notify community members of the testing sites. Those interested could register by simply clicking a button when the alert appeared on their phone.

When people arrived at the testing site, they were greeted with posted signs asking them to tune in to a radio station. The county coordinated recorded announcements in eight different languages that stated testing was free, what the test is like, and how to obtain results. The recordings were on loop on the station, so all attendees would know what to expect.

In total, more than 2000 people were tested in two days. Although the number of cases quickly ballooned in the county, they are now beginning to level out, with just over 1000 total cases as of the end of July. "We did some really unique things that worked out well," said Kellogg. ■

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