

Rural Youth Community Health Workers

Background

As the COVID-19 pandemic has progressed over a year, knowledge on virus transmission and tools to protect the public also continues to evolve. Health officials have relied heavily upon news media and internet technology to quickly disseminate this time-sensitive information. Navigating this rapidly changing landscape of health information and the technology required to stay-up-to-date has been a significant challenge for the public. Additionally, overreliance on these dissemination channels has failed to consider limited broadband access and other unique aspects of a rural context. Northern Arizona University faculty from the Center for Health Equity Research (NAU CHER) and the Arizona Community Health Workers Association (AZChow) are proposing to partner with the Arizona Rural School Association to bridge these gaps. We recognize that schools are community anchors in rural settings. During this pandemic, high schools have successfully maintained communication with their adolescent students, who are more inclined to hold expertise in navigating the technology needed to stay-up-to-date on COVID-19 and vaccine information. Therefore, we propose to pair the health expertise of NAU CHER and AZChow with the communication capabilities and rural expertise that lie in school networks, to train older adolescents to disseminate health information and support the vaccine registration process in rural communities that do not have community health workers.

Proposed Model

NAU and AZChow will partner with rural school districts to train a cadre of 50 older adolescent peer educators on COVID-19 protection measures, including information about vaccines and the process for registration. Older adolescents will be tasked with sharing health information with at least 25 adult family and community members and supporting the registration of 25 individuals for a COVID-19 vaccine. Each adolescent will be paid up to \$100 for completing these activities between April 1 to June 30, 2021.

Role of NAU CHER and AZChow

This team of health experts are producing health education materials relevant for communities throughout Arizona. These materials are informed by focus group data that our team has been collecting since January 2021 on COVID-19 misinformation and vaccine hesitancy circulating within Arizona communities. Currently, AZChow is adapting this information for use with a youth population. Once complete, this team is positioned to train adolescents identified by school collaborators.

Role of Schools

To execute this model, NAU is proposing to partner with school administrators to further develop this plan and work with the health team in identifying promising students (17-19 years) to serve in this role. Students would need access to reliable internet service and a tablet or computer to participate in the zoom education session (approximately 2.5-3.5 hours).

Additional Benefits

NAU recognizes schools are navigating the restrictions of the pandemic, yet also acknowledges the impact on high school students' education and experiential learning. The goal of this partnership is to integrate the resources of NAU and AzCHOW with the role and positionality of schools in rural communities by providing students an opportunity to get involved and serve their communities that are often overlooked by state health care systems. Additionally, the schools and students' connection with the public health workforce and the university could support students' educational plans and strengthen a path to higher education and employment.