Improving Access to COVID-19 Testing in Diverse Communities

MICKY COHEN-WOLKOWIEZ: Hi, I'm Micky Cohen-Wolkowiez. I'm one of the principal investigators for the RADx-UP program, and I'm joined by Shani, who is the project leader leading the Say Yes! COVID Test program.

Specifically, the task of RADx-UP is to provide (COVID-19) tests to underserved populations and to evaluate how to increase the access and the uptake of these tests in these specific populations.

Within that program, NIH decided to conduct a very innovative study that was a combination of a public health intervention as well an analysis of publicly available data.

SHANI ALSTON: Say Yes! COVID Test was an at-home COVID testing program where we provided 40,000 home testing kits to residents of these two communities for them to perform COVID tests three times a week. Our goal with this program was to reduce community spread through frequent in-home testing. The thought was that if people are testing more frequently, they will see that they are positive faster and will self-isolate, and that would help reduce spread within the community.

So this was a public health intervention, and with the help of many partners we distributed these test kits within the communities. In order to evaluate the program we're looking at publicly available data about COVID hospitalizations, COVID positivity rates, COVID deaths, before, during and after the intervention for us to do an ecological analysis about the impact these home testing kits might have had in the two different communities.

In line with the values and goals of the RADx-UP program, we wanted to target underserved populations in each of the cities and make sure they knew about the program. And they have first grab at the test kits. Underserved populations can sometimes be the last to hear about different initiatives in their communities, and they don't have the same opportunities to participate.

So I think that was the biggest challenge for us. We had to learn on the fly how to integrate our program into the communities and how to listen to our community members about what was going to work best for them distributing the kits and spreading information about the kits. I think we're really fortunate that we were able to connect with some really awesome community leaders who were able to lead that charge for us.

MICKY COHEN-WOLKOWIEZ: Yeah, Shani, I think you mentioned several things that absolutely made our work challenging and, at the same time, rewarding. The whole piece about engaging the community, I can't emphasize that enough. We would not be able to be this successful if the community was actually—they were at the table from the beginning. They were at the table in terms of the design, they were at the table when the strategies were developed.

That level of trust that our partners already had with the community really allowed us to jumpstart the program very quickly. And by community partners, you know, there were a variety of them. They were leaders in the community, the local health departments were critical in implementing this initiative.

SHANI ALSTON: I think that what makes DCRI such a great partner in these type of community-based projects is that we are definitely wanting and willing and ready to listen to the communities that we step into. And we are trying to be very conscious of not, you know, dropping a research project and they're doing what we want and then exiting without any sort of follow up, without listening to the community members.

MICKY COHEN-WOLKOWIEZ: You know, one of the things that is part of our written exit plan, because we developed in collaboration with the community members a written exit plan, is to go back and share the results. You know, it's critically important, you know, they participated in this effort, and that's just one of the components that was included in that exit plan.

SHANI ALSTON: I hope that we can be an example for more projects like this at DCRI and also within other similar research organizations, and that we can be leaders in the realm of community-based research and help these community engagement partnerships that we've started to develop.

MICKY COHEN-WOLKOWIEZ: You know, in my ideal world, I think what we did is something that can be adapted to other interventions, so I'm thinking a lot about vaccines and how this type of intervention can be used to maybe address vaccine deliberation and maybe do an awareness campaign around that with local community partners, with local community leaders. And what kind of effect could that have in preventing future not only COVID-19 but other pandemics? So I think that this work is kind of like the foundation of additional research that could be done using the lessons learned that we've had from this program and expanding it to other research questions.