

Pritzker Administration Launches Pandemic Health Navigator Program to Further Expand COVID-19 Resources and Vaccine Accessibility

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AURORA – Building on existing efforts to provide pandemic resources and administer the COVID-19 vaccine as equitably and efficiently as possible, Governor Pritzker today announced a new Pandemic Health Navigator Program (PHNP) launched in partnership with the Illinois Public Health Association (IPHA), the Illinois Primary Health Care

Association (IPHCA) and OSF Healthcare System. The program, already in operation in communities around the state, integrates community health centers, community-based organizations, and public health partners to coordinate available resources for Illinois regions that have been most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“This program is about one-on-one connections involving established, trusted members of the community, whether that’s a federally qualified health center, a church, an LGBTQ+ center, a senior center, or a local branch of the NAACP. These are local community organizations who know their peers, their students, their colleagues – people who speak their languages and know their neighborhoods,” **said Governor JB Pritzker.** “When someone tests positive for COVID-19, or comes in contact with someone else who has, Pandemic Health Navigators are there, ready to assist with social service supports, personal care education, vaccine access, and even critical logistics like ensuring access to groceries and food when a person has to isolate. In short, our Pandemic Health Navigators are a crucial part of keeping our most vulnerable residents safe, and I’m so grateful to all of them.”

The Pandemic Health Navigator Program operates throughout all of Illinois outside of Cook County, also known as Regions 1-9. The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) granted \$60 million in funding to Regional Coordinators to ensure resources are available for residents in need either through direct services and/or sub-awarding to Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) and other community-based agencies. OSF Healthcare System serves as the Regional Coordinator for Region 1 and the IPHA serves as the Regional Coordinator for Regions 2-9.

Earlier this year, PHNP began efforts to equip community-based organizations (CBOs) and federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) with funding, training, and resources to provide local support to Illinois residents. To date, 65 CBOs and 23 FQHCs are participating in the program. These partnerships have helped hire more than 400 Community Health Workers and regional supervisors, with the goal to hire hundreds more in the next three months.

The PHNP team also collaborates and coordinates across the assigned regions with the public health system, including with local health departments (LHDs), to support contact tracing efforts and ensure all communities receive needed assistance and to help reduce disparities in health outcomes.

“As we look toward recovering from the health, social and economic hardships brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, we recognize the importance of providing Illinois residents with education, resources and guidance from people they trust,” **said Tom Hughes, Executive Director of IPHA.** “We’re proud to be leading a network of Community Health Workers that are already making an impact by connecting

vulnerable populations with vital education and resources - like access to food and health services - that are positioning these communities to move forward, stronger.”

“While we are on the backside of the pandemic, we are still seeing more than 2,000 new cases of COVID-19 each day in Illinois,” **said IDPH Director Dr. Ngozi Ezike.** “We want to continue to support people who are sickened by the virus to make sure they have the resources they need to overcome their illness. We especially want to make sure they have access to COVID-19 vaccines, as well as others in the communities in which they live.”

IPHA and IPHCA will sub-contract with FQHCs and community-based agencies in Illinois COVID-19 regions 2-9 to recruit the navigators for local COVID-19 education and outreach, to support contact tracing as needed, and to connect cases and contacts with critical services and resources. This may include resources for meals, medicine, mobility support, immigration matters, work and income resources, mental health support, support for unsafe living conditions (e.g. domestic abuse), etc., during isolation and quarantine.

“This program is an important resource to support the healthcare needs of our communities, especially diverse communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic,” **said Cyrus Winnett, Interim President and CEO, IPHCA.** “By leveraging local health departments, community health centers and community-based organizations, we’re providing on-the-ground, trusted support to ensure Illinoisans receive the health education, outreach, and resources they need to be healthy and safe.

To better understand the views and needs of Illinois communities during the pandemic, IPHA and IPHCA recently conducted a survey of more than 800 residents. The survey results showed that Illinois residents are in need of guidance and underscored the importance of sharing accurate information and dispelling common misconceptions. The survey revealed the following data:

- 1 in 5 residents indicated they were not able or unsure of their ability to tell the difference between scientific facts and misinformation or false claims on the Internet.
- 21-percent of residents said they would not get the COVID-19 vaccine.
- More than half (57%) of respondents stated they would be open to working with a Community Health Worker.

“Healthcare providers have been on the front lines in the fight against COVID-19 from day one,” **said Linnea Windel, President and CEO of VNA Health Care.** “The Pandemic Health Navigator Program will provide us with additional tools, resources and

Community Health Workers to support our fight against this virus and help our patients and larger community get through this together.”

For more information about the program and to connect to a local community health worker, visit www.HelpGuideThrive.org.