

BRIEF

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The COVID Contradiction

During the worst of COVID, the Camden Coalition and our partner organizations were able to hit the ground running to support our community. Here's what other nonprofits and CBOs can learn from our experience.



Ask Camden Coalition CEO Kathleen Noonan to talk about the nonprofit's response in the early days of COVID-19 and she gets a bit... nostalgic, not for the devastation, of course, but for the singularity of purpose the pandemic provided. "For us, COVID was both a dilemma and an opportunity," says Noonan. "One of the things it afforded was a very clear goal that trumped everything else — a goal that everyone shared. That is unprecedented in my career — the sense of knowing that we all couldn't get back to normal until we dealt with this one problem."

That laser-sharp focus is part of the reason that by the end 2022, Camden city (where 92 percent of the population identify as Black and/or of Hispanic origin) had a completed vaccination rate of 80 percent and a first-dose rate of 93 percent among people 18 and older, and there is a higher vaccine uptake rate among Black and Hispanic residents than the national averages of 59 percent and 67 percent, respectively. But it also leaves the dilemma, the one Noonan is referring to: "The truth is, at any given time, we have ten, twenty, or thirty issues that are important enough to stop us dead in our tracks and focus on to the exclusion of everything else. But unlike during the pandemic and subsequent public health emergency declared by the federal government, we don't have the luxury of that single-minded purpose."

Yet the new ways of working and thinking, as well as the partnerships that COVID engendered, remain, all of which played a role in bringing about those phenomenal numbers. "Coalition-building is in our name — it's in our DNA," says Victor Murray, Senior Director of Community Engagement and Capacity Building at the Camden Coalition. "From the outset, we've seen ourselves as a body that pulls in different groups to address urgent needs in the community — health needs, housing needs," says Murray, a Camden resident who has been with the Camden Coalition for 13 years.

Those relationships across sectors — whether with local health systems like Cooper University Health Care and Virtua Health; federally qualified health centers like CamCare and Project HOPE; the county and state health departments, or with a wealth of

community-based organizations (CBOs) such as the Camden Area Health Education Centers and the South Jersey Perinatal Cooperative, as well as businesses like Miguel's Pharmacy — put the Camden Coalition in a position to be able to act quickly and effectively. Adds Noonan: "We were able to partner up and pivot, joining up with the county, city, and local hospitals to focus our resources on the crisis at hand."

Finding individuals a safe place to quarantine

This meant every organization, including the Camden Coalition, had to think about its unique strength and capabilities. "We needed to focus so we could help move the dial in this crisis that was impacting the world," says Murray. For the Camden Coalition, moving the dial often starts with housing — a need that became all the more urgent when COVID-19 began spreading through shelters in Camden. "Individuals were displaced and experiencing homelessness, as always, but when coupled with COVID, that was a challenge our local health systems and the county health department couldn't immediately close the gap on," says Murray.

That's where the data from the Camden Coalition's [Health Information Exchange \(HIE\)](#) came in. The Camden Coalition HIE is a real-time database of patient records from a variety of sources, including local hospitals, correctional facilities, and CBOs, among others. "To provide support to unhoused individuals with COVID, we worked with the Volunteers of America shelter, with Joseph's House, and

with the Camden County Department of Health to find shelter for those who needed temporary quarantining — often in local hotels — with our HIE serving as a touch point for case managers who needed to keep track of what individuals needed,” says Murray.

In order to leverage the potential of the HIE, Camden Coalition staff had to train the county health department how to use the HIE — and fast. “We’d been in ongoing conversations with the county about giving them access to our HIE for a year, but it still hadn’t been authorized,” recalls Noonan. On March 13, 2020, everything changed dramatically. “That Friday, I got a call from the county saying they needed access to the data right away, so they would be able to keep track of those quarantining in hotels, who were now officially under the custody of the county,” she says. They needed to know their health information, including who their doctors were and what conditions they had.

Says Noonan: “We turned on a dime. After the call on Friday night, we worked through the weekend, then on Monday, we began to train and provide access for staff in the county’s infectious disease department to access the records in the HIE, which created a way for them to process people.”

The takeaway from this, she says, is that small nonprofits *can* work effectively with big systems with a minimum of red tape — and vice versa. “I think there’s often a bias on the part of nonprofits that bigger systems are bureaucratic or are not able to move quickly,” says Noonan. “That’s not always the case.”

Murray concedes that it was not easy. “At the time, testing was happening in a lot of different systems and environments, so there was no clear way to see who was being tested for COVID or who was infected,” says Murray. The Camden Coalition HIE helped the county track where infected people were at a particular time. “An individual might end up at Joseph’s House, a shelter we have worked with over the years. If they tested positive for COVID, we would coordinate with the shelter to think about where they could spend time in isolation. Then, we provided individual case management, including a nurse who would visit the individual while they were quarantined and make sure infected individuals were connected with primary care, as well as food. We also kept families up-to-date on their status,” says Murray. “It was all about creating a workflow to help people understand where individuals were.”

Coordinating care in quarantine

After being admitted to Cooper University Hospital for a kidney infection and endocarditis in March of 2020, Michael Waldman tested positive for COVID-19. “I was homeless at the time, so they transferred me to a hotel to quarantine — it was better than being on the streets,” says Waldman. To complicate matters, Waldman was taking Suboxone to treat an addiction to pain medication and he didn’t have his pills with him. “I talked to a nurse from the Camden Coalition, and they arranged to get the Suboxone for me, along with my other medications,” says Waldman, who, after going through rehab, hopes to get a license to become a truck driver. “I wouldn’t wish my experience on anyone, but I’m grateful for the help and opportunity the Camden Coalition gave me.”

Close collaboration with unconventional partners

The partnership between the Camden Coalition, Cooper University Health Care, and Camden County was emblematic of how crucial it was for different entities to work together during the worst of the pandemic. Other collaborations flourished during this time as well, chief among them being the weekly “micro-summits” chaired by Louis Bezich, Chief Administrative Officer at Cooper University Health Care, and Chair of the Camden Coalition Board of Trustees. “The New Jersey Department of Health reached out to us to coordinate activities in the city of Camden to maximize our efforts, starting with testing,” says Bezich.

What made these meetings unique is that they brought together organizations that didn’t usually sit at the table together on a weekly basis, including the county and state health departments, health systems, federally qualified health centers, CBOs, and other nonprofits. Adds Noonan, “Cooper took

a firm lead, with Lou Bezich running the meetings, which got bigger and bigger as more organizations and people came into the fold,” says Noonan. Too often, the fragmentation of healthcare means that nobody is truly in charge, which gets in the way of prioritization and focus. That wasn’t the case here.”

“We shared experiences and coordinated pop-up sites around Camden city with each organization playing a role,” recounts Bezich. For Cooper, that role was being the keeper of the vaccine. “We had the freezers and the pharmacists,” he adds. The Camden County Department of Health would help with promotion, put up a tent, and secure a location in the community.

“COVID stretched the resources of county governments across the country. Working with a large health system like Cooper and smaller CBOs such as the Camden Coalition allowed us to leverage strategically their capacity and expertise to best meet the needs of Camden city,” said Camden County Commissioner Director Louis Capelli, Jr. The Rutgers University Camden School of Nursing and the county provided nurses and nursing students to give the vaccines. Then the Camden Coalition would canvass the neighborhood a few days in advance of the pop-up site to get the word out. The Camden Coalition also set up incentives for people to get there, including bringing in food banks and connecting people to other services. “We really got into a rhythm,” says Bezich.



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While Camden has a history of this type of coordination, there was something unique about this level of collaboration. “We were already collaborative in South Jersey, but COVID took everything to another level with daily check-ins around joint events”, said Helen Hannigan, the Executive Director of the Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative, designated by the state Department of Health to manage COVID education by CBOs for the region. Added Noonan, “This was the most intensive coalition work we’ve ever done, where we were checking in weekly with various partners’ data and saying, ‘Okay, how are we going to direct our resources to deal with this or that issue,’” says Noonan.

Agrees Murray: “The coordination has always been a part of the way Camden operates, but during COVID, we really used those meetings to optimize and coordinate our strategies. Early on, there would be an event happening at one end of a block on one day, then an event at the other end of the block the following day. But having the weekly micro-summits with everyone at the table together helped us form a cohesive overall strategy.”

Pooling and using live data was also key to successful outcomes in Camden County. “We very much believe in using data that is live *today*, in other words, data points that represent people who need help in the moment” Noonan explains. In terms of the pandemic, that meant using data to set up testing and vaccination sites where they were needed most, in zip codes with the highest case rates or in neighborhoods where residents were showing vaccine hesitancy.

Thinking (hyper) local

That kind of zip code to zip code local strategizing is part and parcel of how the Camden Coalition operates. “We’ve always intentionally engaged the local community, not just making sure residents are looped into events but also turning to individuals and businesses in the community for regular input and advice,” says Murray. Because, as the Camden Coalition has discovered again and again, the people in the community are the best experts on what works for them.

“At the beginning of the pandemic, we were involved in setting up a COVID-testing site that wasn’t in an ideal location because it was tough for local people to get to via public transportation, and they told us so,” says Murray. “Their feedback helped all of us as a group think about making different decisions that incorporated voices from the community as we decided things, from where to place resources to how to word something on a flier. Our job was to be receptive to their input and provide a clear channel for receiving that information.”

One such channel is the Camden Coalition’s Community Advisory Committee, which, prior to COVID, did outreach in Camden related to various topics such as encouraging people to complete the national census. Once COVID hit, the Camden Coalition took the idea of mining community wisdom further, creating a Community Ambassadors program and, later, a Youth Ambassadors program, the latter with 60 or so volunteers from ages 13 to 22. All Ambassadors, adult and kids, received ongoing training to stay updated on the latest information on COVID and the vaccine. They then took to the streets, going door-to-door to let residents know about pop-up testing sites and, later, encouraging the vaccine-hesitant to get a shot in the arm. All Ambassadors were paid for their work.

Those community ambassadors also contributed some unique perspectives that could only come from people who had lived in Camden all their lives. “I was out canvassing with one of our Ambassadors, working in an apartment complex, and he was talking with a young lady who was leaning out a window,” Murray recalls. “He told her, ‘Do you know that sixty percent of your neighbors have gotten at least one vaccination? When have you ever known sixty percent of people from Camden to do anything?’ That was such a profound moment for me,” says Murray. “This Ambassador saw that number as a strength we could talk about, and I took that back to the office and let everyone know. That kind of thing only



happens when you are out working with people side-by-side and, just as important, when you are open and receptive to what they are saying.”

The Youth Ambassadors provided some invaluable insights as well. “We were going to put a lot of information about events on social media, but the kids steered us away from that,” says Murray. “They felt that there was so much misinformation on social media and that it wouldn’t be a healthy venue for getting out our message. We adjusted our plan to promote these events based on their advice.”

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Where we go from here

Now, as we begin to turn back our efforts to the urgent issues that have been there all along and still remain, it makes sense to take a close look at what worked well during this world-wide crisis — including reliance on live data, collaboration between sectors, and community wisdom — and apply those strategies after COVID. “For me,” says Noonan, “the question is, can we do what we did on a regular basis, without the world being focused on a single issue?”

The good news is that the collaboration, specifically, formal, regular meetings between organizations that hadn't always sat at the table together, continues. "Cooper still runs the micro-summit meetings with the same diverse set of stakeholders once or twice a month to talk about sharing resources, what the numbers say," says Noonan. "Because of that, we are now in a position to act quickly for the next crisis."

Agrees Cooper Health's Lou Bezich: "I talk to folks about bottling the camaraderie, the pride, and the enthusiasm. COVID showed that we can get together and get things done." It also highlighted how crucial it is for healthcare providers to also think about things like education, employment, housing insecurity, and transportation to keep citizens healthy. "All these things have a dramatic impact on people's health, and to address these issues, we need to work with government organizations and nonprofits," says Bezich, who calls this an "interdepartmental and interdisciplinary approach to solving problems."

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Another thing that COVID made clear — which helped make the kind of collaboration Bezich is talking about so successful — is that up-to-the-minute data is essential. "[The data] helped us track exactly what was going on with testing, vaccines, how we were doing, the worst zip codes, where we needed to do more work," says Noonan. "That's definitely sustainable."

Finally — and this is the heart of what the Camden Coalition is all about — it's important to continue to amplify voices in the community, using their knowledge, their potential, and their wisdom of what works and what doesn't. "Cooper still requests the help of our Community Ambassadors — they show up, they provide support. It's a community resource that we're proud of and want to grow," says Noonan. "Camden's response to COVID is a success story, and now we are motivated to leverage what worked to keep that momentum going."

Developing youth leaders

Isaac Pacheco, an 8th grader in Camden, became a Youth Ambassador even though he initially had some doubts about getting vaccinated himself. "I wasn't one hundred percent sure, but they broke it down for us in our trainings. They told us about the rumors versus the truth, showed us scientific papers and I realized — 'Hey, we *need* this,'" says Pacheco. What was even more challenging for the 15-year-old than getting a vaccine was overcoming his shyness to strike up conversations with strangers about the

importance of vaccination. "For me, it took a lot of patience to try to talk to people knowing some would just walk away," he admits. "But the more I did it, the more I wanted to do it, because at some point, someone comes by and they're interested," he says. Besides Pacheco's convincing various family members to get vaccinated, including his brother and cousin, "Being a youth ambassador really improves you," he said, "because you have to open yourself up to the world."

Keeping things local

The Camden Coalition harnessed the power of local businesses to spread the word about testing and vaccination.

Early on in COVID, the organization and its partners were working with larger pharmacies like Walgreens and Rite Aid to administer tests and vaccines. “But Camden has mom-and-pop pharmacies that are trusted by locals,” says Murray. One of those pharmacies is Miguel’s, owned by Miguel Arriaga, another Camden native. The pharmacy, says Arriaga, is not just a place where people go to fill prescriptions; the store also sponsors coat drives and toy drives, constantly giving back to the neighborhood. “They have an extremely tight relationship with the community,” says Murray, who points to the fact that when the store was robbed at gunpoint a few years ago and the police made the surveillance video public, the community turned in the perpetrator the next day. “Camden is not a place where people turn others in, but that shows you the realness of how they feel about Miguel’s,” says Murray.

That kind of loyalty resulted in higher vaccination rates. “When the Camden Coalition approached us to see how we could work together, we were happy to collaborate,” says Arriaga. “Originally, we had one person doing vaccinations and it wasn’t enough. The Camden Coalition came with nurses, staff, and grants, and helped us put on events to educate people about COVID-19,” he says. The vaccination effort was so successful, he says, that the County Board of Health got involved, funneling unused vaccines to Miguel’s from different sources to keep things going. “To date, we’ve vaccinated 23,000 people, some coming all the way from Philadelphia and Newark,” he says. “We’d never have been able to do it without the help of the Camden Coalition. They believed in a little pharmacy and what we could do for the community.”



About the Camden Coalition

We are a multidisciplinary nonprofit working to improve care for people with complex health and social needs in Camden, NJ, and across the country. The Camden Coalition works to advance the field of complex care by implementing person-centered programs and piloting new models that address chronic illness and social barriers to health and wellbeing. Supported by a robust data infrastructure, cross-sector convening, and shared learning, our community-based programs deliver better care to the most vulnerable individuals in Camden and regionally.

Through our National Center for Complex Health and Social Needs (National Center), the Camden Coalition works to build the field of complex care by inspiring people to join the complex care community, connecting complex care practitioners with each other, and supporting the field with tools and resources that move the field of complex care forward. The National Center's founding sponsors are the Atlantic Philanthropies, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and AARP.



800 Cooper St., 7th Floor
Camden, NJ 08102

P 856-365-9510

F 856-365-9520

camdenhealth.org