

Supporting the medically fragile and socially vulnerable

Marcus T Coleman and **Sarah Baker** provide insights and recommendations, based on their collaboration with private sector, faith-based and civic society partners, to help officials and community leaders lead their communities through crises and help to make sure that nobody is left behind

Public officials and community leaders are managing multiple crises while also dealing with Covid fatigue. Each of these groups must recognise, and meet as best they can, the requirements of medically fragile persons with chronic medical needs and dependencies, as well as socially vulnerable groups – those with insecure access to key social determinants of health, including food, financial stability, education and housing.

First of all, invest in efforts to guide people through the infodemic. The World Health Organisation defines an infodemic as: “An over abundance of information – some accurate and some not – occurring during an epidemic. Like pathogens in epidemics, misinformation spreads further and faster and adds complexity to health emergency response.”

A series of micro-summits in partnership with the Council on State Governments Eastern Regional Conference Council on Communities of Color (CSG CCC) in the USA, underscored the importance of investing in communication strategies and accompanying resources. This helps public officials and community leaders identify and promote legitimate, verified information and provide their audiences practical and actionable guidance to meet the needs of the medically fragile and socially vulnerable. This involved looking across the intersection of needs arising from the pandemic and developing multifaceted resources, such as frequently asked questions on telemedicine, prescription refills and how the two connect.

As this pandemic continues and guidance for different groups evolves – particularly as other emergencies like hurricanes, wildfires and the annual flu season compound challenges such as practising social distancing when sheltering – it is important for public officials and community leaders, as trusted messengers and communicators, to share clear, population-specific information. It is critical for content creators in government and community groups to develop clear and compelling content that meets the intended audience at their point of need, not necessarily their point of interest.

It is important to care for the caregiver. As the effects of compounding disasters increase demands on government and community organisation resources alike, ensuring caregivers are equipped and empowered to do their best work is essential. This includes family and community caregivers, as well as frontline healthcare workers.

AARP broadly defines family caregivers as: “Any relative, partner, friend, or neighbour who has a significant personal relationship with, and who provides a broad range of assistance for, an older person or an adult with a chronic, disabling, or serious health condition.” In 2017, about 41 million family caregivers in the United States provided an estimated 34 billion hours of care to adults with limitations in daily activities. The estimated economic value of their unpaid contributions was approximately US\$470 billion. One important support that public officials have provided family caregivers, given that financial compensation is beyond their scope, includes baseline mental health resources such as a distress hotline.

Faith-based organisations are an example of community caregivers. According to research from the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, such organisations provide a range of services, with an estimated contribution of US\$1.2 trillion dollars to the US economy and society. These range from the basic economic drivers of any business – staff, overheads, utilities – to billions spent on philanthropic programmes, educational institutions and healthcare services.

Throughout the pandemic, faith-based organisations have been working around the clock to meet the needs of communities and caregivers through food distribution services and health ministries. In the US, denominations like the National Baptist Convention work across sectors to meet the needs of medically fragile and socially vulnerable through their disaster management programme.

Content and context experts

It is also important to connect content and context experts. Identifying and working towards desired health outcomes before or during a crisis requires technical expertise and being a content expert on the issues upon which you are leading. However, without engagement, support, and championing from the context experts, a concept introduced by Lisa Attygale at the Tamarack Institute, any crisis response effort will fall short.

Content experts are: “Professionals, staff in your organisation, service providers and leaders with formal power who have knowledge, tools and resources to address the issue.” Examples include medical professionals, supply chain practitioners and first responders.

Context experts are: “People with lived experience of the situation, such as patients and children. They

are the people who experientially know about the issue.” The value of context experts can be observed in the promotion of scientifically validated public health practices by influencers, artists, media personalities and prominent brands.

When it comes to meeting the needs of the medically fragile, healthcare supply chain components are key content experts. These private sector companies, including manufacturers, distributors and healthcare facilities such as community pharmacies, have deep knowledge of community health needs and have the resources to meet them. During emergencies, these private sector capacities are amplified when they work with context experts in response, relief and community-based organisations.

One example that stands out amid the countless examples of the power of uniting content and context experts during Covid-19, is a partnership between Ineos – one of the world’s largest chemical producers – as a content expert in hand sanitiser, and Healthcare Ready, as a context expert in domestic US healthcare facility needs. Ineos developed thousands of gallons of hand sanitiser, but was not aware of which hospitals and regions were in the greatest need. By partnering with Healthcare Ready to learn and connect to areas that needed sanitiser, Ineos was assured in getting supplies to where they were most needed.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is another example of an organisation leading at the intersection of bringing content and context experts together. In partnership with Healthcare Ready, this has included developing training on equity in emergency management and securing personal protective medical equipment for individuals and families disproportionately affected by Covid-19.

Another idea is to employ data-informed approaches. Organisations working year-round to support vulnerable populations have access to critical data that shapes their work – the perspectives and voices of these groups. Healthcare Ready conducts an annual poll to learn the attitudes of Americans towards disaster preparedness, to help inform planning efforts, for example. Collaborating with organisations that meet the needs of medically fragile and socially vulnerable persons reinforces the need to keep an open and honest view of what quantitative and qualitative data is informing your approach.

Lean into opportunities to make systemic investments. Charity will continue to play an important role in helping those in need. However, charity is insufficient as the sole source of funding or means for collaboration between private sector and non-government organisations. In the context of medically fragile populations, healthcare supply chain components are important partners in helping to shape and support investment aimed at addressing systemic health disparities, because they have intimate knowledge of community health needs and their history.

Finally, remember to appreciate and empower informal social networks. Formal social networks, such as houses of worship and disaster response agencies, are important in managing a crisis. But to access the hard to reach, it’s equally important to appreciate and activate informal networks that exist. Different countries have people who serve this role in communities. For example, in some Spanish speaking communities the phrase ‘promotores or promotoras de salud’, describes trusted individuals who empower their peers through education and

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connections to health and social resources. Mobile apps like WhatsApp and Nextdoor are examples of channels where these informal networks are growing.

Approaching such networks with collaboration in mind can help to ensure that your message, guidance and end goals to meet the needs of the medically fragile and socially vulnerable – as well as other hard to reach groups – are successful. **CRJ**

Sources

- *AARP*, Valuing the Invaluable 2019 Update: Charting a Path Forward;
- *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*: The socio-economic contribution of religion to American society: an empirical analysis;
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