

Dakota County Public Health: Learning by Listening

Dakota County Public Health staff were ready to take the next step. Having incorporated health equity into their strategic plan, staff wanted to learn together how to engage more authentically with residents, clients, and community members.

Staff focused on building relationships with Somali women living in the county. After months of planning, Dakota County Public Health hosted two listening sessions: one for women, and one for teens. County staff held the sessions during community gathering time at a local mosque. They relied on a public health employee and her personal knowledge of Somali customs to ensure community members felt welcomed with traditional seating, refreshments, and storytelling.

More importantly, staff listened—to women sharing what it meant for them to be healthy, how to encourage others to be healthy, and what they needed to live a good life. Dakota County Public Health staff learned that, for these women, physical and mental health are interrelated and tied to social support, faith, and culture. Staff also heard the women’s concerns about loans and business assistance, career services, and learning to vote—all factors that, while not under the purview of public health, directly impact the health of women, their families, and their communities.

County staff heard teens share how they understood their health, and their belief in positivity and prevention. Many teens helped their parents navigate the health care system, and showed interest in care coordination as a result. Teen boys present wanted to focus on youth employment opportunities, while teen girls noted they needed more opportunities for physical activity and highlighted tobacco prevention.

As a result of the listening sessions, the community will work on policy development and education on nutrition, physical activity, and tobacco.

Next steps for Dakota County Public Health?

- Planning similar discussions for men from the county’s Somali community
- Coming full circle by connecting listening session teen participants to SHIP-funded mini-grants, to better connect them with resources they need to achieve, per Dakota County Public Health’s strategic plan, “their highest level of health and wellness.”

“We ask each other for advice. I’d rather take advice from someone going through a similar situation as me—sometimes even over my doctor.”

—Somali community partner

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- **Watch for internal policies that constrain authentic community engagement;** for example, liability insurance and consent forms.
- **Build time and flexibility to address those policies**—ideally, before making plans with community members.
- **Continuously examine assumptions and patterns that shape work;** there is a nuanced but important difference between gathering data and listening

