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Supplement: From Philanthropy to the Front Lines
Managing Through Crisis
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Managing Through Crisis

Six lessons on how corporate philanthropies can strengthen community connection and communications.

BY ALLISON FRAILICH & LIZ LUND

Those who work in philanthropy are likely familiar with crisis response and management. But when we in the sector are also directly affected by that crisis while working to respond to it, the fullness of the impact comes into even greater focus. When COVID-19 first emerged in China in the final months of 2019, the Medtronic Foundation rapidly responded to immediate needs on the ground. We did our best to prepare clear and quick communications and assess where we could provide the greatest support. But as COVID-19 crossed borders, the pandemic raised the stakes for communities, first responders, and philanthropists worldwide.

Unfortunately, just as we started to adjust to life in a COVID-19 world, we were faced with more shattering news. George Floyd was killed by police in our hometown of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Communities were left reeling, not only from Floyd's death, but also from the police killing of Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, and of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia. These tragedies forced a nationwide reckoning, and the city we love—as well as cities and towns across America—had to face an important reality: We allowed racism to go unchecked, while many of our own neighbors suffered. As protesters marched in the streets, we realized we had a responsibility—as leaders in our community and as those driving global change—to do more.

The community members and health workers most affected by these events have been on the front lines, entrenched in fighting global and national emergencies on two fronts. In this article, we share an inside look at what it is like to experience a crisis while attempting to deliver critical communications and on-the-ground support to communities locally and globally.

ACTING QUICKLY

As a foundation, our focus is on improving

health for the underserved and supporting communities where Medtronic employees live. COVID-19 and systemic racism are affecting many of these same communities, and we felt a responsibility to help them chart a path forward. Communities wanted to be heard and people hungered for information and support. Outreach and humility in listening and learning quickly rose to the top of our responses.

As community needs—from food and shelter to cleaning supplies and protective

equipment—increased exponentially, it became apparent that we had to implement a strategy that addressed these needs on a number of fronts. The Medtronic Foundation made a conscious decision to extend greater support to nonprofit organizations providing for basic needs, in addition to help ensure small business resilience and to provide general operating support for nonprofit organizations serving people of color who are hardest hit by both COVID-19 and systemic racism.

To do this, we partnered with our colleagues in local cities around the country and globally to better understand which nonprofit partners are cornerstones in their community. We also engaged national partners like the United Way and Feeding America to inform us about the needs their affiliates were seeing. All of this information helped us to formulate a plan to address the needs with precision and urgency.

Many of the Medtronic Foundation's long-term partners required emergency support to continue to provide their core services, in



addition to addressing new, immediate challenges in their communities. For example, the Minneapolis-based social services organization Pillsbury United Communities recognized the urgency to support basic services like emergency income and food distribution, as well as a new need to provide education on COVID-19 prevention measures like social distancing. At the same time, the nonprofit's revenues dropped as face-to-face programs were put on hold, and contributions from individuals and corporations slowed. Another Medtronic Foundation partner, Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio (CLUES), a St. Paul, Minnesota-based nonprofit supporting underserved Latino families, needed rapid support in setting up Spanish-language hotlines for clients affected by the pandemic, along with bilingual telehealth options and case management.

While corporate philanthropies can target funding in ways that support the goals of frontline organizations, they don't have the

People's Center leads COVID-19 testing at a community center in Minneapolis, Minnesota.



same on-the-ground experience within these communities that nonprofits themselves have. Therefore, it has been important for us to partner with leaders in the communities we support to identify gaps and provide support.

Using existing relationships, the Medtronic Foundation identified nonprofit partners that could help us target our dollars to the

Corporate philanthropy plays an important role in ensuring communities manage through the storms and reach the underserved.

underserved populations who needed funding most, significantly reducing our usual six-to-nine-month grantmaking process down to just six weeks. For example, in Boulder, Colorado, we partnered with the Boulder Community Foundation to assess needs in the area and identify the groups that were in the best position to provide solutions.

In total, the Medtronic Foundation was able to support 40 new nonprofit partners in 2020. Our partners led the way in mobilizing local support and relief efforts. Since the pandemic began, we've helped more than 1.4 million people in the United States find food and shelter, and we've helped our partners distribute 24 million pounds of food. We also connected Medtronic employees to hundreds of volunteer opportunities that allowed them to give back in their own communities in ways that were meaningful to them.

LESSONS FROM THE GROUND

From the Medtronic Foundation's on-the-ground response, we identified six actions essential for philanthropies to consider as they respond to crises.

Be visible | Leaders need to be seen and be ready to listen. Don't wait until you have all the answers—when a crisis occurs, people need immediate help and philanthropies must rise to the challenge. Your involvement and response will be critical to maintain the trust you have earned both with long-time nonprofit partners and the communities you serve. That means acting quickly to support organizations on the ground and communicating your response just as rapidly as it is happening, so people know and understand

exactly what actions you are taking and how they can help.

Be clear, direct, and thorough | A crisis is not the time for lengthy key messages. Instead, look for ways to simplify your message, communicate it clearly, and speak from the heart. Marketing experts often talk about user experience, and at no time is there such a requirement to focus on how "end users" experience your communications than during a crisis. Those end users and your audience may vary from employees to social justice and global health leaders. Balance clarity and speed while staying true to your mission and goals.

Be aware of differing experiences | People react differently in crisis. When it comes to COVID-19, some people are eager to make charitable contributions or find a way to volunteer, while others are facing new financial hardships due to changes in the economy or directly experiencing COVID-19, either personally or through a loved one. According to Pew Research Center survey in March 2020, "nearly 9 in 10 US adults say their personal life has changed at least a little bit as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, with 44 percent saying their life has changed in a major way." In your communications and community response, be considerate of these varying experiences and ensure actions are inclusive of a wide spectrum of situations and emotions.

Be nimble while maintaining commitments | Organizations around the world have shifted their activities online, and that includes volunteering. For philanthropies and nonprofits looking for ways to engage volunteers, consider ways to make the experience easier, such as a one-stop resource on your website or a "virtual volunteer power hour" to engage many volunteers at the same time. Opportunities like these allow you to meet the pace of change in these times and stay true to who you are.

Be a good community steward | No single organization can address these crises alone. Corporate philanthropy plays an important role in ensuring communities manage through the storms and reach the underserved. Philanthropies can provide tools, resources, and skills to rapidly respond. But no one is more prepared and equipped to respond than the nonprofits on the front lines who serve their communities every day.

Be sure that your focus on community is not only evident in your approach to partnerships

and programming, but also in your approach to internal and external storytelling. Create a sense of community and shared experience among your audiences, and adapt your communications to lift up the ways in which people embrace collective action at a global and local scale. For example, through a virtual meeting, we were able to bring the stories of our non-profit partners to Medtronic employees in an inspirational way. Medtronic employees have a personal stake, and close-to-home experience, with the crises we're facing today. This meeting allowed them to learn how our investments are directly reaching community organizations, explore how to play a part in our efforts, and most importantly, listen to the stories of the real heroes who are reaching the underserved.

Be thoughtful about your long-term impact | For philanthropies moving quickly, ensure that programs you support will create a long-term effect on the people you serve. Things shouldn't return to normal after a global crisis like COVID-19. Rather, we have an opportunity to build safe, strong, equitable, diverse, resilient, and inclusive communities. Those on the front lines must overcome the challenges before us, but our global community also must grow stronger in the days ahead. Even in the midst of a crisis, ensure specific outcomes are in place to measure short-term impact and that nonprofit organizations you partner with are equipped to continue to provide results in the future.

HOW CRISIS SHAPES US

The way an organization leads and reflects its values in its response to crises is a litmus test of its core mission and can build or shatter trust. In one moment, all the hard work you put in day-to-day to advance your objectives can dissolve. Our personal experiences while in the midst of crisis changed our approach to communications and community engagement, and it gave a deeper perspective on what really matters. It is because of those experiences that the Medtronic Foundation was able to create a response that will shape our reputation, and most importantly, our ability to drive meaningful change long into the future. ●

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Bringing Health Care into Communities

Community health workers at the front lines of the pandemic are providing essential care for underserved populations.

BY AHMED SOUGUEH & JOKHO FARAH

From balconies in New York City to the National Assembly in Kenya; across Spain, Italy, Turkey, Singapore, India, and many other nations around the world—some of the most inspiring images from the pandemic have shown leaders, celebrities, and everyday people clapping, ringing cowbells, and banging on pots to recognize and give gratitude to the health workers on the front lines of the COVID-19 response.

This global acknowledgment was heartening to see, considering that frontline health workers too often go unrecognized. Yet, they are playing a critical role in caring for those communities most effected by the pandemic, while at the same time risking their own lives. Especially in underserved communities, frontline workers like community health workers (CHWs) are helping vulnerable patients to reduce their risks by understanding symptoms and seeking testing and treatment early.

In the United States, the need for such support is greater for people who live in communities of color, which have been disproportionately exposed to the virus and are more likely than people in white communities to not receive care they need or to experience severe disease or death. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Black Americans are 2.1 times more likely to die of COVID-19 and 4.7 times more likely to be hospitalized than white people. Hispanic Americans have a 4.6 times greater risk of hospitalization and 1.1 times greater risk of death than white people as well.

When the coronavirus hit the United States in early 2020, health officials in Minneapolis, Minnesota—including the clinical staff at the People's Center, a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC)—had concerns about the potential for the virus to spread in the city's Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. This area is home to the largest Somali population in the world outside of East Africa, and it includes

many refugees who live in public housing. In fact, one high-rise building in the neighborhood has more than 4,000 residents, making social distancing a challenge and placing residents at higher risk of exposure.

But even with higher risk of contracting COVID-19 in their densely populated neighborhood, People's Center staff discovered many residents didn't want to get tested. Based on their experiences with health care in Somalia, staff found some local residents weren't used to seeing a doctor for preventive care. In Somalia, they would only see a doctor on rare occasions, and only when they could afford it. Instead, people typically would rely on their community's support and home remedies. Some feared they couldn't afford to see a doctor or, if they did test positive, they would be taken to the hospital against their wishes and separated from family. Others were afraid to see a doctor due to fear of being mistreated.

Social and cultural barriers like these aren't unique to Minneapolis and its Somali American residents. Across the world, some of the most important factors contributing to poor health are rooted in social determinants of health, including the cost and affordability of care, language barriers, lack of experience with health systems, transportation needs, child-care, safety, and other social issues. Traditional health systems are often ill-equipped to address these barriers. So, now more than ever, CHWs are playing a significant role in bridging these gaps and helping underserved people access the healthcare they need.

SURMOUNTING BARRIERS TO BETTER HEALTH

For Minneapolis' Somali American community, mental health needs have created a significant barrier to better overall health. Many patients carry scars from their experiences in Somalia that have only been exacerbated since the pandemic and its economic effects began.