

The Follow Along Program Redesign

Community Connector Milestone Update

February 2025

Introduction

The Community Connector project is part of the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Follow Along Program redesign. The Follow Along Program (FAP) is funded through the Healthy Beginnings, Healthy Families Act in Minnesota 2023 Statute 145.9575. The goal of the program redesign is to better reach populations that have been historically underserved by the FAP. Since February 2024, grantee organizations have been recruiting and deploying a group of Community Connectors to provide culturally and linguistically inclusive outreach for families as they enroll and participate in the FAP.

The FAP Community Connectors specifically serve families from focus population groups, including (but not limited to) Tribal Nations, American Indian, African American, Somali, Hmong, Latino, and Karen communities, as well as those from rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. In addition to Community Connectors, a Community Engagement Team serves the role as an advisory group for this project. The Community Engagement Team is made up of families, organizations, and state agency partners.

This milestone update provides community partners and local public health organizations a summary of key learnings along the way.

Identification of key considerations

MDH engaged community and local public health agency partners in the summer of 2024 in a series of in-person meetings to discuss how to incorporate culturally, linguistically, and ability-affirming strategies into the FAP redesign. Over the fall, the Community Engagement Team and Community Connectors reviewed the learnings from those meetings and identified key considerations and recommendations. These include:

- Coordination with Local Public Health (LPH) and community organizations, including outreach resources
- Culturally, linguistically, and ability affirming inclusive strategies to support professionals in facilitating families' enrollment, participation, and access to developmental resources and materials

Coordination and outreach resources for LPH and partners

A strong relationship and clear channels for communication between Local Public Health (LPH) and community organizations are essential for families enrolling in and participating in the FAP program. This foundation helps community partners to fully support families in accessing resources and materials that LPH provides. Reliable informational resources, such as an organization's website, provide clear channels for communication and referrals. Culturally appropriate materials available in plain language and ability affirming messages support easy

translation and interpretation of the program for partners and families. Supportive and clear messages will provide families what they need to do to enroll and participate.

Table 1: Recommendations for coordination and outreach

Recommendation	Community Organizations	Local Public Health	MDH – FAP
Build strong relationships	<p>Provide name and contact information to LPH staff.</p> <p>Invite LPH to join in community events held at their organization.</p>	<p>Provide community partners the name and contact information of the FAP staff person who administers the ASQs.</p> <p>Attend community activities</p>	<p>Host meetings that bring together LPH and partners.</p> <p>Celebrate partner achievements.</p> <p>Create opportunities for collective learning, collaboration, and discussion.</p>
Ensure communication platforms provide sufficient details for reliable referrals	<p>Ensure MDH and LPH have a link to your organization’s website to share with families.</p> <p>Provide details such as age range and counties served, languages available, contact info, and culture-specific resources.</p> <p>Highlight specialized services provided by your organization so families know what type of support they can receive.</p>	<p>Provide a link to community organizations on the LPH program website.</p> <p>Describe the benefits of the FAP and how families can enroll.</p> <p>Provide details such as age range and counties served, languages available, contact info, and culture-specific resources.</p>	<p>Ensure LPH websites are linked on the MDH-Follow Along Program website.</p> <p>Create a space on the MDH-FAP website with links to community organizations that support families with young children who are at-risk or have special health needs and disabilities.</p>
Provide culturally appropriate materials that are in plain language and accessible to all	<p>Provide one-page handouts and electronic links to resources for families that are in their primary language and explain developmental milestones.</p> <p>Share created resources with LPH and MDH.</p>	<p>Provide plain language talking points for community partners to share with families about the benefits of the program, family stories, developmental milestones, enrollment and participation.</p>	<p>Provide accessible templates in plain language with visuals and audio that can be used for flyers, handouts and videos.</p> <p>Provide a resource hub with outreach materials created by partners.</p>

Additional cultural and linguistic strategies for professionals to support enrollment, participation and access to resources

Community connectors, LPH and the Community Engagement Team emphasized the importance of centering the diversity of languages and culture to support enrollment, participation and trust building with families.

Table 2: Cultural and linguistic strategies to support enrollment and participation

Recommendation	All providers working with families
Building trust for enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify trusted community leaders to help promote word-of-mouth recommendations Engage with families in their primary language to builds connection and trust Ensure consistency in resources across programs Share stories that highlight diverse family experiences who benefited from the program Clearly explain to families, both in person and through written materials, what is expected of them in the program
Meeting diverse needs for full participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet families where they are at —acknowledging their unique journey and priorities Provide flexible hours for families to meet when it’s convenient for them Share activities and resources designed for different stages in child’s learning and growth Create opportunities for back-and-forth discussions to create a dialogue with families
Additional cultural strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When possible, provide in-person interpretation Provide culturally relevant explanations for western-derived concepts like “peek-a-boo” Leverage visuals, audio, and mixed-media approaches support inclusion, access Provide a list of common household items that families can use for developmental activities

Early Reflections and Next Steps

Trust is key

Community partners, Local Public Health (LPH), and the Community Connectors emphasize trust and collaboration as catalysts to building a strong and vibrant Follow Along Program. Community connectors see their role as a trusted resource for families that can amplify messages that are shared by MDH and LPH. High trust helps to counteract social stigma a family might feel if their child is not meeting developmental milestones.

In their 4th quarter progress reports, community partners shared feedback on ways they've seen trust develop. One partner shared, "it's been beneficial to hear how Community Connectors explain the program to families." Others noted how relationship building has supported growth in enrollment and participation, and as alternatively expressed by another provider, "It seems that parents are hesitant to participate in a program that doesn't have a personal connection and that requires the completion of paperwork and questionnaires." Relationships built on trust motivate families to stay engaged with the program as they navigate resources supporting their children.

Community partners highlighted the trust building with LPH that resulted from the 2024 summer series. In their 4th quarter progress reports, one partner shared how their relationship with their LPH provider and timely communication has helped with family participation. "When they [LPH] process the enrollment or send out an ASQ, they email us so we are aware and our staff connect with the family about a week later to see if they need assistance completing the questionnaires." Partners acknowledge that trust requires ongoing investments of time and resources and hope for future opportunities to continue trust building and work together.

Developing a resource guide to support collaboration and implementation

Over the coming months, we will work with LPH, the Community Engagement Team, and Community Connectors to develop a resource guide to highlight key considerations, and layout further recommendations that support collaboration and cultural inclusive strategies necessary to implement the FAP redesign.