

# COVID-19 health equity initiatives: New York City Department of Health

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In this installment of "COVID-19 health equity initiatives," we look at how New York City used data and cooperation from community organizations to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Overview of initiative

### NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

The COVID-19 Organizing Response Plan (CORP) by the New York City Department of Health concentrated testing in neighborhoods with low testing numbers and high rates of COVID-19 positivity.

CORP offered both rapid point of care and polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, as well as wraparound services to support connections to health care providers, hotelling, and quarantine counseling for newly identified cases and contacts. Testing was conducted in community facilities and mobile vans that were strategically placed outside visible public spaces, all chosen in part to allay the fears of populations that may otherwise have been skeptical of interacting with government officials. Resource navigators staffed the operation to ensure effective and adequate point of care services.

The pre-engagement process included data-driven planning and deep collaboration with community partners. The selection of priority zip codes and convenient testing sites within them, as well as the outreach and engagement planning, was based on both disease surveillance data and qualitative interviews with community and faith based organizations, educational institutions, community boards, local businesses, and other partners who were able to identify and elevate the specific needs of neighborhood residents.

In Tremont, longstanding relationships, made possible by the NYC Health Department's Bronx Neighborhood Action Center and its 17 years of work in the community, were critical to the ultimate success of the operation. —Torian Easterling, deputy commissioner, Center for Health Equity and Community Wellness, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

## What was the impetus for the racial equity work?

By early July 2020, the peak of the COVID-19 crisis in New York City (NYC) had passed, but there were still communities with low testing numbers and high positivity rates, several of which were Black and Latino neighborhoods. Due to a convergence of factors including poverty, overcrowded housing, high concentrations of front line workers, high rates of chronic disease, and a history of structural racism, data showed residents of these neighborhoods were not only more likely to contract COVID-19, but also to suffer severe health outcomes as a result. This necessitated a hyper local, multi-agency response that concentrated testing and follow-up point of care services in order to interrupt transmission of the virus.

## When did the work begin? When is it expected to end?

On July 8, 2020 NYC launched a rapid testing operation in the Tremont neighborhood in the Bronx (10457 zip code), a zip code with almost 70,000 residents, less than 2% of whom are non-Hispanic white. The operation lasted for two weeks and by July 22 more than 3,500 residents had been tested. The successful operation was then replicated in the Sunset Park neighborhood (zip code 11220) of Brooklyn in the following weeks.

## What are the expected results or outcomes?

- Administered 8,730 tests across the two zip codes that hosted a CORP testing initiative (3,558 in 10457 and 5,172 in 11220)
- Identified positive cases of COVID-19 and provided resources and wraparound services to individuals and their families
- Disseminated key messaging about the virus and preventing transmission
- Decreased community transmission of COVID-19 within the priority zip codes

## Who are the key partners for this work?

- NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
- NYC Health + Hospitals
- Office of the Mayor
- NYC Test and Trace Corps

- NYC Department of Education
- Community and faith based organizations
- Clinical and non clinical businesses
- Community boards and other local elected officials

## What are your future steps for this initiative?

The CORP initiative, a hyper local approach, will expand to other NYC neighborhoods disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 to increase testing and connection to services.

## What advice & recommendations do you have?

Seventeen years of work in the community were critical to the ultimate success of the operation.

## Contact information

For more information about the New York Health Department initiative, please contact: Torian Easterling, first deputy commissioner and chief equity officer, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene at [teasterling@health.nyc.gov](mailto:teasterling@health.nyc.gov).

## Find out about other initiatives

- Black Arizona COVID-19 Task Force
- Cambridge Health Alliance (Massachusetts)
- Chicago Racial Equity Rapid Response Team
- Meharry Medical College
- Michigan Public Health Institute
- Milwaukee Health Department
- Public Health Alliance of Southern California
- Spectrum Health Lakeland
- UC San Diego Refugee Health Unit

Visit the COVID-19 health equity initiatives main page for additional information.