

Dept. of Health Services: Secretary-designee Karen Timberlake's statement about Thank You Tour stops with Milwaukee County health care heroes

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“It was an honor to meet with multiple partners who bring their expertise in delivering healthcare and promoting health to everything they do, and especially to their work in protecting the health and safety of Wisconsin’s marginalized and underserved communities, both throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and prior to it. Hearing stories and experiences from our Milwaukee-area Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) and Vaccination Community Outreach (VCO) grantees was truly rewarding.

Today’s stops on the Thank You: Moving Forward Together Tour kicked off with a roundtable discussion hosted by Dr. Lyle Ignace and the Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center, including representatives from the Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association, Milwaukee Health Care Partnership, and Progressive Community Health Clinic. Joined by Dr. Michelle Robinson from the Office of Health Equity and Gail Nahwahquaw from the DHS Tribal Affairs Office, participants identified strengths, challenges, and strategies that will help them better support the health and well-being of the communities they serve as we move forward. In addition to discussing ways that DHS can better collaborate with community health partners, participants emphasized the need to work collectively to address the stark health disparities that predated COVID-19 and that persist in Wisconsin’s Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color. The three big takeaways from this robust discussion include the need to increase access to culturally-responsive behavioral health services,

invest in the health care workforce, and continue strengthening relationships with local, state, and federal partners.

The second Thank You Tour event of the day was hosted by the community-based non-profit Health Connections, Inc., and its founder and CEO Ericka Sinclair. Along with its commitment to improving the health of Milwaukee's most vulnerable, Health Connections Inc. is a DHS Minority Health Program and VCO grantee. This event amplified the crucial work of all of our VCO partners in delivering services, support, and education to Wisconsinites amid COVID-19. Even before the pandemic, community-based organizations had been serving on the frontlines, addressing the health, wellness, and economic needs of their community members. From providing wraparound services such as delivering groceries, coordinating ride-shares, and providing housing supports, these organizations have strong foundations as trusted voices in their community. And with the VCO program, we are able to amplify the trusted relationships these partners have with their communities by investing in the work our partner organizations have been doing for years. Since the program launched, we have provided nearly \$18 million to support more than 149 organizations like Health Connections Inc. in work such as hosting vaccination clinics, promoting vaccine confidence, and serving as conduits connecting local, state, and federal partners to the populations they serve. The commitment and dedication of our FQHCs and VCO grantees embody what it means to be a COVID-19 hero, and I thank all of these organizations, in Milwaukee and around the state, for their work to promote and protect the health of Wisconsinites."