

MCW Leaders Build Community Partnerships During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

By Richard N. (Dick) Katschke and Sara L. Wilkins

Five years ago, in 2018, MCW celebrated 125 years as a cornerstone institution in the region and the state. In preparation for that milestone anniversary, MCW chief historian Richard (Dick) Katschke began to write a comprehensive history book to mark this significant achievement. Katschke's monumental work, *Knowledge Changing Life: A History of the Medical College of Wisconsin, 1893-2019*, was published in the spring of 2021 and explores MCW's 125+ years of accomplishments, challenges and controversies. The 720-page book also has served as a foundation for reimagining the institution – thinking generatively and creatively about how to educate the next generation of health and science thought leaders, how research is conducted and applied, how healthcare is delivered, how MCW engages with its community, and how the institution collaborates and partners.

In advance of MCW's 130th anniversary this year, Katschke has been writing a follow-up volume of MCW's history – currently titled *The COVID Years, 2020-2023* – which highlights many of the institution's successes and challenges in pursuit of the aspirational reimagining goals as noted above.

To that end, the cover story draws on Katschke's in-progress work to highlight MCW's heightened engagement, leadership and collaboration in Milwaukee, the region and the state as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beginning in March 2020, MCW provided steady voices from the medical and scientific community who shared credible, understandable fact-based scientific information; partnered with the business community to address industry challenges; communicated with the public to ensure its safety (especially addressing the needs of underresourced communities); served as a community resource for vaccination clinics; advocated in the state legislature and much more.

Many important lessons were learned during this time that will positively affect healthcare in the future, inform health behavior interventions and advance community-led initiatives to advance health equity.

What follows is a brief snapshot of MCW's leadership during the pandemic and its legacy as an invaluable community resource and partner.

(Editor's note: all direct quotes in this story were culled from interviews conducted by Katschke in advance of writing his new book.)

In mid-March 2020, Mara Lord, PhD '23, MBA, MCW's senior vice president for university engagement and strategic planning, saw both a need and an opportunity.

The need was for someone with a steady voice from the medical and scientific community who could provide credible, understandable information to the people of metropolitan Milwaukee and the state on the COVID-19 pandemic, its spread and the latest fact-based scientific information.

The opportunity was for MCW President and CEO John R. Raymond, Sr., MD, a leader with the knowledge, credentials and community stature, to take on the role. In doing so, Dr. Lord saw the potential

to rightfully establish MCW as a primary source of medical and scientific knowledge in the community.

Dr. Lord recalled, "Just before the World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 as a pandemic, we had received a call from the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce (MMAC) asking if Dr. Raymond could participate in a webinar on COVID-19 for the business community. He agreed."

Dr. Raymond told the *Milwaukee Business Journal* that while he prefers to work outside the spotlight, he embraced the public role he assumed in southeast Wisconsin, initially advising business leaders and later serving the public as a local voice of science and medicine.

His mission included delivering responses to the infodemic of misinformation and disinformation in social media and sensationalized headlines in other outlets.



COVID-19 VACCINES - WHAT TO EXPECT

COVID-19 VACCINES AT A GLANCE

PFIZER-BIONTECH (mRNA)	MODERNA (mRNA)	JOHNSON & JOHNSON/JANSEN (traditional)
2 SHOTS* IN THE ARM 21 DAYS APART	2 SHOTS* IN THE ARM 28 DAYS APART	1 SHOT IN THE ARM
AGE 16+	AGE 18+	AGE 18+

*Both shots must be of the same vaccine. Those who are pregnant or breastfeeding, or those with severe allergies to vaccines or carry an egg-protein allergy, consult their health care provider prior to receiving the vaccine.

SIDE EFFECTS TO EXPECT:
You may experience a range of side effects that could develop within a day or two of getting vaccinated:

- In the arm where you received your shot: pain, redness and swelling
- In the rest of your body: chills, tiredness and headaches

 It's important to understand that these are all signs your immune system is working and generally last one day. The CDC communicates that the benefits of getting the vaccine outweigh the risks of getting ill from COVID-19.

HOW DO THE VACCINES WORK?
The vaccines use mRNA (Pfizer and Moderna) or an adenovirus (Johnson & Johnson) to tell your cells how to make antibodies that protect you against COVID-19. They will not alter your DNA. Individuals who get the vaccine will not be contagious or shed live virus.

CONTINUE TO PRACTICE THE 3-WS:
Even after getting vaccinated, it will still be important to protect those around you by continuing to:

- WATCH YOUR DISTANCE
- WEAR A MASK
- AND WASH YOUR HANDS.

 It's possible future booster shots will be needed.

V-SAFE CARD:
Upon receiving the vaccine, you can sign up for V-safe, a smartphone-based tool that uses text messaging and web surveys to provide personalized health check-ins after you receive a COVID-19 vaccine. More information can be found on the CDC website.

UPDATED 3/9/2021 | WWW.CDC.GOV | SOURCES: CDC, HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

COMMUNITY PROTECTION:
Widespread vaccination for COVID-19 means the virus cannot infect as many people, resulting in fewer people spreading the virus.

AT LEAST 80 PERCENT of the population needs to be vaccinated to attain community protection, according to medical experts.

NATURAL IMMUNITY:
There is not enough data available to indicate how long someone who had COVID-19 is immune to the virus, otherwise known as natural immunity. Early studies indicate natural immunity may not last long, but more data is needed.

ONGOING VACCINATIONS:
At this time, it is anticipated the vaccines will be given using only one or two shots. It's possible future booster shots will be needed.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY:
EVEN AFTER GETTING VACCINATED.

- SOCIAL DISTANCING
- WEARING A MASK
- AND WASHING HANDS

WILL BE CRITICAL TO HALTING SPREAD OF THE VIRUS.

UPDATED 3/9/2021 | WWW.CDC.GOV | SOURCES: CDC, HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

MCW developed educational materials to inform community members about COVID-19 safety precautions and public health measures.

Developing Messages and Building the COVID Communications Infrastructure

With Dr. Raymond on board to serve as a steady voice, he needed input about the messages to deliver – and key information channels had to be identified. Other COVID-19 experts within MCW needed to be identified and trained on how to deliver scientific information to the public. And MCW needed technology support to develop interactive webinars and presentations for audiences numbering into the thousands.

Dr. Lord reached out for help to Arik Johnson, chair of research, technology and learning consultancy for Aurora WDC, a Wisconsin-based firm that helps organizations worldwide deploy technology to amplify insights.

Together, Dr. Lord and Johnson brought Tim Sheehy (president of the MMAC) and Milwaukee business leaders into the conversation to advise on what was needed from the business community to navigate the early days of the pandemic.

Just days later, a first webinar was held focusing on the intersection of health and the economy. It turned into a daily briefing

just 20 minutes long that ran throughout the summer of 2020 – more than 200 in total that were produced with various stakeholders around the region and beyond.

One of the individuals that Dr. Lord tapped to be in daily morning briefings was Laura Cassidy, MS, PhD, MCW's associate dean for global health and research director and professor in the Institute for Health & Equity (IHE). Dr. Cassidy recalled, "The morning meetings included Mara and representatives from public health, government and the MMAC to strategize. We came together from all sectors and worked together in a way I've never seen happen before. We were a small group and represented different disciplines and sectors. We weren't the decision-makers, but we could influence things. We were each seeing things through different lenses, but we all had the same goal."

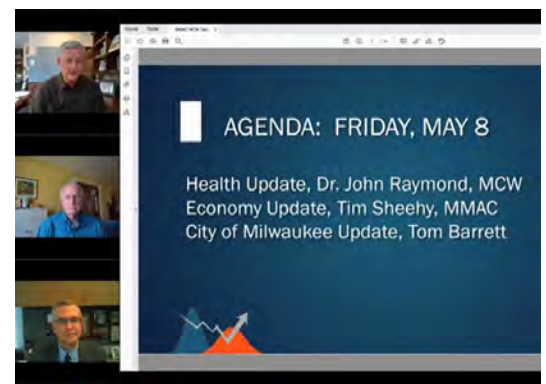
Partnering with the Business Community

It had the potential to be a major confrontation.

MCW supported a public health approach to minimize the spread of COVID-19 by

encouraging people to stay home and avoid contact with others. The business community wanted to protect the economy by keeping stores open and maintaining a sense of normalcy in daily activities. When asked what prevented a confrontational situation between the business community and MCW, Sheehy said, "Two words: Dr. Raymond."

Sheehy explained further, "Dr. Raymond became an early, instrumental and trusted



(top to bottom) Tim Sheehy, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett and Dr. John R. Raymond, Sr., partnered for a series of COVID-19-related webinars for city businesses.



In May 2020, MCW and the MMAC joined with the Milwaukee 7 Economic Development Partnership to create an online toolkit designed to help businesses reopen and operate safely during the pandemic.

voice with these business leaders. We asked him for the facts around COVID, and how it was transmitted and what he was seeing. We didn't ask him for policy recommendations. We asked him, 'Will this level of masking work? Is social distancing working? What remediations would work?' Then the business leaders were free to make their own decisions. It was a very direct, fact-forward conversation."

He continued, "This was an environment built just around the health facts, and that's why those meetings every week for 50-some weeks were so critical. The webinars built a following, reaching about 40,000 people in total. Why did people come to those webinars? Because they knew they were not getting any spin."

In May 2020, MCW and the MMAC joined with the Milwaukee 7 Economic Development Partnership to create an online toolkit designed to help businesses reopen and operate safely during the pandemic. The toolkit provided a checklist and step-by-step approaches to protect employees and customers as well as information on best practices and links to other resources.

In addition to the MMAC, Drs. Raymond and Lord worked with other business and professional groups statewide. Every Friday, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation and the Regional Leadership Council, representing economic centers across Wisconsin, hosted a COVID-19 CEO Leadership Series during which Dr. Raymond provided a medical update. MCW also provided webinars to the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, Wisconsin Counties Association, Greater Milwaukee Committee, Hispanic community leaders, Black/African American community leaders and pastors, and state, local and regional government officials. Gregory Wesley, JD,

MCW's senior vice president for strategic alliances and business development, described Dr. Raymond's partnership with the MMAC and other business organizations as "an example of bringing together health and the economy to make decisions that were in the best interests of the citizens of the state."

Sheehy said that by engaging with MCW, the MMAC's members saw the breadth and depth of the institution's expertise and the critical intersection of healthcare and the economy.

Communicating with the Public

Beyond the business community, MCW leaders and faculty members provided daily pandemic information to the public through the media and other communications channels. It was becoming an infodemic, as the public was being bombarded with an overload of information, often contradictory, outdated or incorrect. MCW saw the opportunity to share objective information and dispel misinformation – and Dr. Raymond, with his credibility and knowledge, was the most effective messenger to reach the public.

Dr. Lord and her colleagues identified at least a dozen additional experts at

MCW who could provide perspective on the pandemic for the news media, including Joseph E. Kerschner, MD '90, FEL '98, provost, executive vice president, the Julia A. Uihlein, MA, Dean of the School of Medicine and professor of otolaryngology and communication sciences; Douglas Evans, MD, the Donald C. Ausman Family Foundation Professor of Surgery and chair of surgery; Mary Beth Graham, MD, professor and associate chief of medicine (infectious diseases); Ian Martin, MD, professor and chair of emergency medicine and eminent scholar; Silvia Munoz Price, MD, PhD, then-associate professor in the IHE and enterprise epidemiologist for Froedtert Health; and Joyce Sanchez, MD, then associate professor of medicine (infectious diseases).

Another major voice of calm and reason was Ben Weston, MD, MPH, who provided daily science-based information on COVID-19 to the public. Dr. Weston, MCW associate professor of emergency medicine and chief health policy advisor for Milwaukee County, also serves as director of medical services for the Milwaukee County Office of Emergency Management.

Dr. Weston recalled, "One of the biggest challenges, and certainly a focus of my role for Milwaukee County, was communications, which were particularly challenging for two reasons. One was the complexity and unknowns of the virus, which made it hard to communicate, and second, politics and misinformation made it even harder."

COVID-19 WI CEO Leadership Series

 Dr. John Raymond President & CEO Medical College of WI	 Troy Streckenbach County Executive Brown County	 Tamas Houlihan Executive Director WI Potato & Vegetable Growers Association	 Giacomo Fallucca Chairman & CEO Palermo's Pizza
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The Unified Emergency Operations Center was created in March 2020 as a collaboration among Dr. Ben Weston's office and partners from local government, fire departments, law enforcement agencies, emergency medical services, public health departments, healthcare institutions and the business community. Together, they coordinated and elevated a multisector public health response to the pandemic, emphasizing affected vulnerable populations.

Dr. Lord recognized the need to reach the public through social media and the internet. As a result, MCW began producing a series of podcasts on COVID-19 that included information from the institution's physicians and scientists addressing questions raised by the public. The podcasts were a component of MCW's COVID-19 resource center that also included facts, statistics, health and safety tips and videos on the virus.

In the spring of 2020, MCW hosted public-facing weekly virtual community town hall meetings about the pandemic during which MCW physicians and scientists and local community health experts provided updates on the virus and the most current scientific information.



Dr. Ben Weston

Contributing to the Safety of the Community

As director of medical services for the Milwaukee County Office of Emergency Management, Dr. Weston oversees emergency medical services in the 14 fire departments throughout the county and was at the forefront of keeping community

residents and first responders safe from the virus. Dr. Weston was supported by faculty in the IHE who provided COVID-19 data analysis for Milwaukee County by monitoring the reproduction rate of the virus and providing incidence mapping and predictive modeling – all of which contributed to the decision-making by the county's Unified Emergency Operations Center (UEOC).

THE UEOC was created in March 2020 as a collaboration among Dr. Weston's office and partners from local government, fire departments, law enforcement agencies, emergency medical services, public health departments, healthcare institutions and the business community. Together, they coordinated and elevated a multisector public health response to the pandemic, emphasizing affected vulnerable populations.

"Having the support of the vast resources of MCW was invaluable," Dr. Weston shared. "From the epidemiology team helping with data management to my own department providing information on what's happening in the emergency departments, to the reports provided by the infectious disease experts – all these different folks were there to support the community during our time of need."

Addressing the Needs of Vulnerable Communities


Many of Milwaukee's early COVID-19 cases had been found in the Black/African American community, prompting Dr. Raymond to address the urgent need to reach this community with good information about COVID-19. This underscored MCW's need to ensure that everybody, especially those in underresourced communities, knew about the dangers of the virus. It also was important that people wore protective face masks to prevent its spread early in the pandemic.

MCW medical students responded by assembling 80,000 face masks made of surgical mask material at a time when personal protective equipment was scarce. The masks were distributed to underresourced communities through community health clinics, and faith-based and community organizations.

Dr. Raymond's concerns about reaching underserved communities were echoed by Jesse Ehrenfeld, MD, MPH, MCW senior associate dean, director of the institution's Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin (AHW) Endowment and professor of



MCW medical students and members of a research team sort personal protection equipment for assembly and delivery to Wisconsin nursing homes as part of an AHW Endowment-funded COVID-19 response project.



Fewer than two weeks after the pandemic was declared, AHW released \$4.8 million in rapid-response funding to support 17 projects statewide in response to COVID-19 in Wisconsin – some of which targeted assistance to underserved urban and rural populations.

anesthesiology and clinical informatics. Fewer than two weeks after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic and stay-at-home orders shuttered American businesses, schools and offices, AHW released \$4.8 million in rapid-response funding to support 17 projects statewide in response to COVID-19 in Wisconsin – some of which targeted assistance to underserved urban and rural populations.

One project of note was a \$500,000 grant to the city of Milwaukee's Health Department. The project was designed to rapidly improve communication of prevention guidelines to communities of color in Milwaukee County as well as piloting online training for community health workers and public health outreach personnel to respond to the mental health and well-being needs among these communities.

Twelve community health workers were hired to reach out to Milwaukee's Black/African American, Hispanic, Southeast Asian and Native American communities. The community health workers assembled and distributed thousands of disposable masks and disinfectant wipes through local businesses, community events and door-to-door home visits. The community health workers also developed public service

announcements and podcasts in Spanish and Hmong and utilized radio broadcasts, YouTube and social media to provide current health and resource information, and worked with Black/African American media outlets to address misinformation.

A Community Resource for Vaccination Clinics

Months before there were vaccines for COVID-19, MCW convened a group that included the office of research, office of the president, School of Pharmacy and others to plan the institution's development of COVID-19 vaccination clinics. MCW was one of the few organizations in the state that had the ultra-cold freezers needed to store mRNA vaccines and pharmacists who could draw up and distribute the doses.

MCW's application to the state to be a site to receive and administer COVID-19 vaccinations was accepted. From December 2020 through April 2021, MCW rolled out COVID-19 vaccinations for frontline workers, essential workers, individuals over 65 years old and individuals from educational, childcare or other healthcare facilities. In addition, MCW leadership also identified eligible recipients, including local opinion leaders whose vaccinations might positively influence others to be vaccinated, as opportunities became available.

Dr. Kerschner shared: "The goals for the program were to work with our clinical partners to ensure rapid vaccination availability for the institution's front-line workforce, to support state public health agencies in offering a vaccination opportunity for underserved and higher education community members, and to train vaccinators. A key component of the program was the MCW COVID-19 Vaccination Clinic, and 88 percent of MCW's workforce was fully immunized

against COVID-19 with the two-dose mRNA vaccine by April 30, 2021. Within the MCW clinic, 56 pharmacy and 163 medical students learned to administer vaccines."

MCW's Vaccination Clinic was staffed predominantly by approximately 50 pharmacy students and MCW pharmacy faculty who oversaw the students. The School of Pharmacy standard curriculum already provided didactic and laboratory training in immunization administration to pharmacy students, and the School of Medicine rapidly developed a new COVID-19 vaccination curriculum for medical students. Licensed volunteer vaccinators included School of Medicine and School of Pharmacy faculty, nurses, advanced practice providers and community volunteers. Compounding included School of Pharmacy and School of Medicine researchers and faculty; all doses were rechecked by licensed pharmacists. Staff from MCW's offices of public safety, compliance, communications, human resources, finance and legal provided additional support.

In total, nearly 300 internal and external volunteers directly supported the clinic in vaccinator or other capacities, offering more than 5,000 hours of service. MCW's leaders reached out to business, education, community and faith-based organizations in underserved communities to help identify eligible, vulnerable populations for vaccinations. MCW's COVID-19 Vaccination Clinic administered more than 20,000 vaccinations, 12,450 of which were administered to members of the external community.

Advocacy in the State Legislature

MCW sought legislative changes on two issues related to pharmacy education that impacted the operation of MCW's COVID-19 vaccination clinics. Wisconsin law required that pharmacy students providing immunizations could only be precepted by pharmacists. This proved challenging when pharmacists were occasionally in short supply to staff clinics. In mid-February 2021, MCW successfully gained



The MCW Hub Vaccination Clinic enabled faculty to train 163 medical students and 56 pharmacy students under the direct supervision of licensed healthcare professional volunteer preceptors.



MCW School of Pharmacy faculty and students assisted in providing more than 20,000 vaccines to healthcare personnel and other eligible populations on the first floor of MCW's Hub for Collaborative Medicine.

legislative support to change the law so that physicians also could precept pharmacy students and pharmacists could precept medical students.

One other legislative hurdle that needed to be surmounted centered on a Wisconsin law prohibiting pharmacy students from providing immunizations until they had completed two years of pharmacy school. Other states surrounding Wisconsin didn't have similar restricting legislation.

George E. Mackinnon, III, PhD, MS, RPh, founding dean of MCW's School of Pharmacy and professor of pharmacy, recognized that the pandemic was an opening to seek legislative change.

Dr. MacKinnon said at the time, "We're in a pandemic. We need more immunizers, not fewer. By my back-of-the-envelope calculation, if the University of Wisconsin and Concordia University changed when they teach immunizations, we could get 400 more immunizers overnight."

MCW successfully pursued the legislative change with the support of both of these pharmacy schools. On December 3, 2021, Act 98 was signed into law, enabling pharmacy students to provide immunizations earlier in their pharmacy matriculation. For the first time, pharmacists are now recognized as non-physician healthcare providers in the state of Wisconsin under Medicaid.

HealthyMKE: Providing Vaccination Information to Vulnerable Communities

Through most of 2020, MCW's communications were focused on the epidemiology and transmission of COVID-19. After the vaccines became available in late 2020, Joy Tapper, executive director of the Milwaukee Health Care Partnership, led the creation of a group called the Community Vaccine Response Committee. She reached out to Dr. Lord to ask if she would lead a vaccine communications effort across the county; Dr. Lord agreed, and in short order, a multifaceted communications project was created called the Vaccine Integrated Communications and Outreach Mobilization team (VICOM). Dozens of professional communicators were engaged from across the county to participate in VICOM, including co-founders of INPOWER, a

marketing firm based in Milwaukee's Harambee neighborhood.

INPOWER launched the HealthyMKE website on January 7, 2021, initially providing information on COVID-19 vaccine access for county residents including the locations of vaccination clinics and COVID-19 testing sites. Additionally, in April 2021, VICOM began a media blitz aimed at building vaccine confidence across Milwaukee County. The campaign was designed to enable the public to make an informed choice about taking the COVID-19 vaccine. It included a focus on 15 ZIP codes that were disproportionately impacted during the pandemic.

Informed by focus groups led by Jump at the Sun LLC (JATSC) (a health literacy firm located in the 53206 ZIP code), the campaign recognized the importance of hearing authentic, relatable stories from local members of the community to both honor their unique perspectives and to show how getting vaccinated was a way to express personal strength and commitment. The campaign also ensured equitable representation and pay in front of and behind the camera.

The first phase of the multimedia ad campaign, called "Authentic Voices," included TV, radio, digital outdoor billboard, online digital and social media advertising featuring diverse members of the Milwaukee community and produced by creatives from Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx and Hmong communities. The campaign was made possible through generous in-kind donations from Hanson Dodge Creative and area media outlets, as well as financial support from several area

organizations. The "Authentic Voices" messaging reached more than 300 million impressions in just six months.

Supporting materials for the community-wide public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic included an ad campaign in support of vaccinations.





From July 2021 to October 2021, community mobilizers covered 48 census tracts, visited 20,193 homes and provided in-person education to 2,902 residents. Clinicians paired with mobilizers to administer 731 vaccinations in or near people’s homes.

In addition to the advertising, JATSC led an effort to recruit and train 150 individuals from underresourced communities as community mobilizers to go door to door to share vaccine information. From July 2021 to October 2021, community mobilizers covered 48 census tracts, visited 20,193 homes and provided in-person education to 2,902 residents. Clinicians were paired with mobilizers and administered 731 vaccinations in or near people’s homes.

According to Dr. Weston, VICOM’s collaboration using an equity lens throughout the entire process could be a critical building block for the future. “This model could be scaled to enhance equity and promote other positive health behaviors and could serve as a bridge to overcome medical mistrust – building relationships at the neighborhood level with individuals from the community who serve as health advocates and liaisons to more complex health infrastructure,” he said. (See sidebar on page 21 that details Dr. Lord’s PhD thesis on a related topic.)

Reflections

Looking back on MCW’s engagement in the community during the first years of the pandemic, Dr. Raymond said, “I think a lot of people appreciate what MCW did. And I believe what they appreciate the most is that we, for the most part, drove down the middle of the fairway. When people asked political questions, we said, ‘We’re going to stick to the science. If you’re asking about public policy, you really should be talking to the policy makers.’”

Elizabeth “Betsy” Brenner, an MCW trustee and former publisher of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, recalled, “Our secret weapon was John Raymond. He was everywhere. He responded calmly with authority. He really provided that trusted authority for the community in a time of crisis that Wisconsin needed. John was able to represent MCW, but, even more importantly, represent Wisconsin by giving people the calm information they needed to move forward, run their businesses and run their lives.”

Sheehy added, “If there is a takeaway from this, it’s that the Medical College of Wisconsin played a preeminent role in making sure that Milwaukee got through this crisis.”

When looking to the future, Dr. Weston shared, “I do think there’s been learning from the pandemic that will positively affect health in the future. We’ve learned a lot from the Milwaukee County COVID Dashboard, in designing it and then using it to inform health-related approaches in the community. We’ve been working on a similar EMS dashboard that we can use to improve community health. For example, if we can have a dashboard that looks at gun violence, we could do a lot of interventions ... the same with opioid overdoses, same with cardiac arrest. So while the collateral damage from COVID has been massive, I hope there’s a silver lining that will enable us to take a lot of the learning and apply it to enhancing health in the community.”

MCW’s statewide leadership during the pandemic also provides opportunities for preparedness for the future, including: fast-tracking vaccine research and technology; integrating public health into an unified system for improving health; strengthening the supply chain; developing, expanding and using telehealth; focusing on prevention (not just cures); and addressing health disparities. ■

Jump at The Sun Consultants (JATSC) led an effort to recruit and train 150 individuals from underresourced communities as community mobilizers to go door to door to share vaccine information (photos below at left and right). At center, Dr. Mara Lord and Lorraine Lathen, founder and CEO of JATSC.





A Community-Led Implementation Framework to Foster a Reciprocal Continuum of Trust

In May 2023, Dr. Mara Lord, MCW's senior vice president for university engagement and strategic planning, was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Public and Community Health. Her dissertation, *A Community-Led Implementation Framework to Foster a Reciprocal Continuum of Trust*, drew on MCW's multifaceted community-wide responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and lessons learned.

The rapid onset of the pandemic, intersecting with an "infodemic" and economic crisis, exacerbated health disparities – disproportionately impacting individuals in marginalized communities and highlighting systemic disparities in health equity based on race and ethnicity.

Vaccines brought a promise to end the pandemic, but also complexities in attitudes toward vaccine and vaccination. Historical mistrust and distrust, misinformation and disinformation, and racism led to vaccine hesitancy, which became the most significant barrier to achieving high levels of vaccination rates in Milwaukee County.

In her study, Dr. Lord used implementation science and community-engaged research to assess determinants of vaccine uptake in marginalized Milwaukee communities through qualitative and quantitative analyses.



The Community Mobilizer implementation strategy enabled vaccination behavior and generated goodwill and capacity-building among stakeholders."

vaccination. They also were paired with clinicians to offer vaccination in homes to increase COVID-19 vaccine uptake in communities with high social vulnerability and low COVID-19 vaccination rates.

Dr. Lord's findings included six implementation determinant themes: trust in community-based leaders; perception of resource needs; authenticity of Community Mobilizers; rapid deployment of implementation strategy; goodwill outcome of trust validation; and relational dynamics and capacity-building. A key enabling

A novel Community Mobilizer intervention was deployed in which individuals recruited from socially vulnerable communities were trained to visit homes to talk about COVID-19 and



Dr. Mara Lord receives her PhD diploma from Dr. John R. Raymond, Sr., at MCW's Commencement ceremony on May 19, 2023.

implementation determinant was a cascade of trust and influence among stakeholders.

Dr. Lord concluded that authenticity and trust are key enabling determinants of an implementation strategy to influence health behaviors and that the Community Mobilizer intervention was novel in an emergency state when it was critical to reach individuals in high-vulnerability communities to lower incidence of disease. She noted, "The Community Mobilizer implementation strategy enabled vaccination behavior and generated goodwill and capacity-building among stakeholders. This implementation strategy could inform future health behavior interventions and implementation strategies as well as the development of a community-led implementation framework to advance health equity."