

Community Weekly

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When the Governor declared a State of Emergency in March 2020 to address the looming threat of an emerging pandemic, we could not have known the extent to which the pandemic would transform our lives. Since then, every one of us has been impacted by it. Reflecting on what we at the Roanoke City and Alleghany Health Districts (RCAHD) have learned, several things come to mind:

- **Access to real-time data:** In order for local health departments to be able to optimally protect the communities we serve, we must know what is happening in our communities. As an example, COVID-19 testing was the primary tool in our toolbox in the beginning of the pandemic because it allowed us to identify people who were infected and we were able to make recommendations to isolate that person and quarantine their close contacts to help slow the spread. Today, testing still plays a vital role in controlling the pandemic. Having systems in place to make it easy for healthcare providers report test results and to make disease activity reports available to the public (data dashboards) were and remain essential duties of the health department. Find a testing location at <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/covid-19-testing/>.
- **Reliance on partnerships:** It became apparent very early that the only way through this pandemic was to work together. We are so fortunate to have had so many dedicated community partners working with us at every step. In both our testing and vaccination efforts, there are three organizations that were crucial partners in the public health response. The Virginia Army National Guard were initially deployed to our area last year to assist with our testing events and stayed with us through May, helping us deliver thousands of vaccines at our large vaccine events at the Roanoke and Salem Civic center events. Our partners at Carilion Clinic have been by our side every step of the way, providing a wide range of services for the public during the pandemic, particularly with respect to our mass vaccinations clinics. And finally, we would not have been able to protect our community without the help of our extraordinary Medical Reserve Corps who have helped us in every conceivable way. While these three partners helped us with “boots on the ground” public health services, countless more partners contributed, including other healthcare providers, especially those serving our most vulnerable residents; our local elected officials and first responders; our school superintendents and their staff who have worked tirelessly to protect our children; and so many more. We are committed to continue working together to protect and improve the health of all of our residents.
- **Resilience of our community:** As we celebrate that Virginia has reached the goal of having over 70% of the adult population having received at least a first dose of vaccine, as our case counts slowly trend down, and as restrictions ease, it is heartwarming to see families and friends safely returning to our new normal. Despite all of the challenges we have faced, we see strength and resilience everywhere we look.

As we move forward, it is important that we apply these lessons learned and that we honor the more than 500 community members we have lost to COVID-19 by doing everything we can to learn from the past year. Unfortunately, we still are fighting this nasty virus as the Delta variant, a more contagious and potentially more dangerous strain of the COVID-19 virus, poses a new threat across the country. We all still need to do our part to protect ourselves and each other. As the finish line appears to be so very close, let's put our full efforts, most importantly, by getting a COVID-19 vaccine if you haven't done so already, so that we can cross the line together.